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**Colonialist Narratives in Natural History  
Museums: The case of the Giancarlo  
Ligabue Natural History Museum in Venice**

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## Abstract

Natural history museums are important spaces where people go to learn. However, the way in which information is communicated can not only influence the understanding of visitors but also covertly disseminate certain ideas based on the exhibition itself. In this light, recurrent elements in the perception of non-human animals that reinforce some ideologies such as colonialism, ableism, racism, Eurocentrism and progress can be found. For this reason, the analysis of how museums communicate is crucial to determine intrinsic narratives at work - and if so help them to be places where these dynamics can be out-classed.

In this thesis, a specific place is taken into consideration - the trophy rooms of the Natural History Museum of Venice - to see if and how much a colonialist narrative is present. Through the analysis of the space management, the terminology used, and the arrangement of the elements, the goal is to consider the key elements of the rooms and see what implications they entail: do words recall ideas of European superiority? Are animals seen only as objects or also as individuals? Is the point of view of the communities from which the “finds” have been subtracted present? Is there enough contextualisation? Comparisons and possible changes are also proposed, in order to give a concrete outcome. This analysis could be used for communication present in other rooms and/or other museums, in order to encourage reflection on the social role of natural history museums.

# Table of contents

<b>Introduction</b>	<b>2</b>
<b>1 Museums, colonialism and animals</b>	<b>8</b>
1.1 Natural history museums as ethnographic museums . . . . .	8
1.2 Colonialism and museums . . . . .	16
1.3 Non-human animals in Natural History Museums . . . . .	26
<b>2 The Natural History Museum of Venice and its trophy rooms</b>	<b>35</b>
2.1 History and present organisation of the museum . . . . .	35
2.2 The collections . . . . .	38
2.3 General approaches of the museum . . . . .	43
<b>3 Analysis of the trophy rooms</b>	<b>50</b>
3.1 The analysis . . . . .	50
3.2 Elements present in the rooms . . . . .	53
3.3 Spatial organisation . . . . .	61
3.4 Terminology used . . . . .	65
<b>4 Decolonisation, restitutions and outcomes</b>	<b>69</b>
4.1 The decolonisation . . . . .	69
4.2 Restitution . . . . .	75
4.3 A proposal for the trophy rooms . . . . .	78
<b>Conclusion</b>	<b>84</b>
<b>Appendix A: Interviews</b>	<b>88</b>
<b>Bibliography</b>	<b>102</b>

# Introduction

When I first visited the Giancarlo Ligabue Museum of Natural History in Venice, I was an undergraduate student of natural sciences and visited it as part of the zoology course. I remember thinking a lot about the specimens we saw, the different topics presented and explained in the rooms, and how much I enjoyed seeing the vast differences in the natural world. When I returned last year, my situation was completely different. Studying environmental humanities had greatly changed my perception of the "natural world" and my thinking about the connections between different subjects. For example, when I entered the de Reali rooms, I was quite disturbed by the narratives that were there and how other people might have perceived them as well.

For this reason, I have chosen to focus my master's thesis on the relationship between museums and colonialism, particularly natural history museums, as my background and education are also partly related to these types of spaces. The Venetian museum was chosen not only because it was the place that piqued my interest, but also because it is a social, political, and cultural situation that is closer to my everyday experience, so I could better understand some facets of the terminology, history, approaches, and references used. In addition, the museum is quite small, which allows me to pay even more attention to the analysis of museum perspectives.

The dissertation will focus specifically on the role of two ethnographic collections - by Miani and de Reali - and the perception of animals from the perspective of Critical Animal Studies (CAS). CAS is an interdisciplinary field that emerged from the social movements of the 1960s and 1970s. It differs from Animal Studies in that it is more focused on practical change and a political context. In 2001, Steven Best and Anthony Nocella founded the Centre for Animal Liberation Affairs, a cornerstone for the development of the discipline. CAS is based on ten principles: interdisciplinarity, the admission that science is not objective, a practical approach, the consideration of multiple oppressions as part of the same global system of domination, radical anti-hierarchical politics, solidarity, total liberation, deconstruction of binary oppositions (e.g., human/no-nhuman, nature/culture, civilisation/wilderness), radical politics and militant strategies, and the goal of creating

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critical dialogues (Best et al., 2007). It is an approach that can apply to many different disciplines, although it has been used primarily in the Social Sciences and humanities. So this can be a perfect field to deal with museums, colonial legacies, and non-human animals, as I do in this paper.

The presence of ethnographic materials in a natural history museum is neither common nor rare, yet it was interesting to see how these two types of materials, perceived differently from academic fields, policies, and laws, are treated. Analysing not only the organisation of the spaces, but also the approach of the museum staff and the terminology used was fundamental to a more conscious understanding of the situation.

After this introduction about the general aspect of the work, I dedicate the first chapter to the connection between museums, colonialism and animals, to have a historical perspective and some literature to understand the connection. There will also be a focus on the role of taxidermy and its consequences. The second chapter will focus on the Natural History Museum of Venice and its spaces, considering a contextualisation of the collections and the explorers; this chapter will also include the interviews I conducted with the museum staff. The following chapter is the actual analysis of the spaces, focusing on the elements present in the rooms, the spatial organisation and the terminology used. The fourth and final chapter is entirely dedicated to decolonisation, restitution, and suggestions for possible changes in the museum.

In order to understand how colonial narratives can be foregrounded in natural history museums, I will look at authors who have analysed the relationship between colonialism and the scientific world, the museum as a space and institution of European origin, and the human/non-human animal binary - such as Amselle, Grechi, Haraway, and Ko, to name a few. I will then base my analyses on various texts dealing with exhibitions, scientific museology, museum history, and Italian colonialism. In general, then, in addition to the field of Critical Animal Studies, a historical approach will be used to analyse the past of museums, collections, and Italian colonialism. Some aspects more related to the social sciences - experiences in museums, typology of discourses, social constructions - are then necessary to deepen the analysis. The work starts, therefore, from the attempt to understand how the Giancarlo Ligabue Natural History Museum in Venice is influenced by colonialist narratives and the binarism of nature/culture and of human/non-human animals.

The Italian National Association of Scientific Museums (Associazione Nazionale Musei Scientifici, ANMS) emphasises how scientific museums are at the service of society, citizens and culture, in accordance with the historical and local context. In a multicultural context, museums become zones where identities, social struggles, and memories collide (Amselle,

2017). Moreover, the effects of colonialism on language, knowledge, power, and various forms of violence are not always easy to recognise, as they are elements in which we are also immersed in museums.

Natural history museums are institutions that have developed greatly, especially during the Enlightenment. In order not to be simply dead zoos, these institutions have evolved over time and adapted to the social context in which they found themselves. One of the challenges they face today, in particular, is environmental crises - such as climate change and biodiversity loss - in their relationship to colonialism (Dorfman, 2018).

As Norris (2018) points out, these institutions have the “ability to time travel” thanks to the elements they contain, but at the same time they often run the risk of confusing “studying the past and belonging in the past” (p. 14), meaning that they are often just too focused on the past to open up and play an important role in the future. From the emergence of collections under the influence of Western colonialism to the Internet, both the content and the way they are communicated in natural history museums have changed dramatically. Moreover, even at the academic level, the emphasis has shifted from the natural sciences to more laboratory-oriented disciplines such as biology. It should also be noted that the majority of the public associates the museum with the exhibits it offers, while the research it conducts goes unnoticed and therefore appears uninteresting (Alberch, 1997). Nor is there any questioning of the significance of the museum form itself and its messages, with no relevant analysis from the perspective of the social sciences.

Features such as multilingualism and multiperspectivity are therefore essential for today’s museums in an increasingly globalised and interconnected world. To do so, it is necessary to give great weight to visitors’ perspectives and experiences and to try to position themselves as institutions where the experience results from the combination of educational and entertainment purposes (Blond, 2018). In other words, in order to avoid the risk of marginalising the museum structures themselves, it is necessary to change exhibition strategies to adapt them to today’s multicultural and globalised societies (Castelli, 2006).

However, in order to be able to do all this, not only must there be sufficient funding for changes and projects, but also adequate and update legislation must be enacted. However, this is generally not the case, either at the national or international level, with the exception of those regulating the restitution of human remains of indigenous peoples. In this case, the fact that these elements are deeply connected to the spiritual sphere of indigenous communities favours their recognition, protection, and management (Knowles, 2018).

In general, however, museums have not yet reached the point of questioning their form

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and their basic pillars, such as the concept of “science,” exhibition, and species. For this reason, I have chosen to use the Critical Animals Studies approach as the main basis for this thesis.

Colonialism can be seen as a historical process in which one country expands by conquering another and taking over its sovereignty. Therefore, decolonisation is the process of leaving colonialism, that is, the independence of the colonised country. However, this process should also include decoloniality, which is understood as the end of colonialism and not only colonisation. Therefore, today there are countries where decolonisation has taken place, but decolonialisation has not yet taken place. Decolonialisation is a much deeper process that touches on various aspects of modernity, which is seen as a consequence of European colonial expansion and is based on concepts such as progress, evolution and development, but also capitalism, the link between knowledge and power, culture as civilisation, and various hierarchical categorisations. Therefore, the review of these fundamental paradigms is a necessary action to overcome all aspects and consequences of colonial approaches (Borghi, 2020). Generally, however, museums have not yet reached the point where they question their form and their pillars, such as the very concept of “science”, exhibition and species. For this reason, I have decided to use the Critical Animals Studies approach as the main basis of this thesis.

As pointed out by Armstrong (2002), there are two main postcolonial themes that can be associated with Animal Studies - and that can explain their common rejection of Descartes, who did not acknowledge that non-human animals can even suffer and therefore do not cogitate. The first is that the idea of a difference between humans (superior) and non-human animals (inferior) stems from the colonial consequences of European modernity. The second is that despite imperialist attempts to erase it, indigenous cultural knowledge continues to challenge the dominance of Western values (Armstrong, 2002).

For Belcourt (2014), colonial expansion caused the emptying of Indigenous lands and the erasure of Indigenous bodies. Through these alterations, domestication, speciesism and other human-animal interactions – in North America but not merely there – were possible. Regarding their death, these two types of subjects were different: while Indigenous people were erased by the genocide of loss of their indigeneity in favour of the colonizers’ life, non-human animal bodies were produced as a commodity for meat, clothing, experiments, violence, companionship and so on. For these reasons, the exploitation of both non-human animals and Indigenous appears to be related to colonialism, and thus the lack of an analysis of colonial practices in animal activism can become, although often implicitly, a form of colonial violence. The author also suggests to add *anthropocentrism* as the fourth logic of white supremacy, after slaveability/anti-black racism, genocide, and



orientalism – which are linked to capitalism, colonialism, and war – proposed by Andrea Smith. He claims that speciesism is related to genocide since the latter is a way to protect capitalistic animal agriculture through the elimination of Indigenous bodies. Anthropocentrism itself is a speciesist, patriarchal, capitalistic, and colonial ideology. Moreover, racial hierarchies dehumanise black and Indigenous bodies for giving them an *animal* status which implies a lack of *humanness*, the latter reserved for white people. The marginalisation of these bodies – represented as miserable, poor, and primitive – has a double effect: on one hand, it refuses to see them as human, and on the other hand, it implies the elimination of non-human animal subjectivity. It is thus anthropocentric to reject animals as colonised subjects. In particular Cudworth (1998), in her doctoral thesis on the relationship between gender and ecology, underlines how according to her the concept of anthropocentrism is too weak and insufficient as it is not only the idea that the environment exists only for humans, but it is a much broader phenomenon encompassing various facets of human domination over the environment - such as controlling, manipulating, exploiting and abusing. For this reason, the author suggests the term *anthroparchy* - human domination of the environment, understood as a non-human living environment (i.e. animals, plants, sea, land, and space) - which refers to the concept of patriarchy - male domination of women, or *wimmin* as she refers. In fact, *anthroparchy* and patriarchy are autonomous systems of oppression, violence, sexuality, and culture, and for this reason some practices and normative approaches are interconnected and intersected between the two. Animals, for example, also become an oppressed group in the anthroparchal view: “‘Humanities’ and ‘animalities’ are conceived as anthroparchic corollaries of patriarchal ‘masculinity’ and ‘femininity’” (1998: 7). Just as *textitwimmin* are oppressed as a sex in patriarchy, animals are oppressed as a species in anthroparchy. A key expression of *anthroparchy* as a product of Western popular culture, particularly of human domination over non-human animals, is the meat industry - which I will discuss in the first chapter by referring in particular to Carol J. Adams.

In summary, the way in which the human species interacts with the environment - understood as biotic and abiotic components - is influenced by the conception it has of itself and of its role on the planet. The dominant role and approach it has had (and still has) has led not only to a general environmental crisis - in terms of climate and biodiversity, for example - but also to the mentalities that have been sewn into the social fabric. The connection between the Western mentality and anthropocentrism/*anthroparchy*/patriarchy has created and influenced the concepts of “humanity” and “animality,” placing the human species at the top of the pyramid of meaning-and specifically the able-bodied, white, European, middle-class, heterosexual male - and the non-human animals in the back-

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ground. Therefore, in order to analyse the museum as an institutional site, as a mirror of society, and as a treasure trove of knowledge, the very concept of science and knowledge must be considered, and for this, contextualising the role that non-human animals play in these structures can be a starting point.

# Chapter 1

## Museums, colonialism and animals

### 1.1 Natural history museums as ethnographic museums

The word “museum” comes from the Latin *Musēum* and from the ancient Greek *Μουσείον*, meaning “sacred place of the Muses” - referring to a mythological place inhabited by the nine goddesses of poetry, music, and the liberal arts. The term allowed for a wide range of social practises and traditions to be covered, and for this reason museums were able to adapt well to changes in societies over time (Findlen, 2018). This is still the case today when museums must deal with issues such as multiculturalism and restitution (Coombes, 2018). Today, the most widely used and comprehensive definition of a museum is that of the International Council of Museums (ICOM), a non-governmental organisation founded in 1946 that plays a leading role in museology, museography, and museum studies in general:

“A museum is a not-for-profit, permanent institution in the service of society that researches, collects, conserves, interprets and exhibits tangible and intangible heritage. Open to the public, accessible and inclusive, museums foster diversity and sustainability. They operate and communicate ethically, professionally and with the participation of communities, offering varied experiences for education, enjoyment, reflection and knowledge sharing”

With the goal of creating a more unified view of what a museum is and does, ICOM has developed the Code of Ethics for Museums, which contains standards for museums that are part of the ICOM community - which includes the Venetian museum considered in this paper. Several aspects are highlighted in these guidelines, including the relationship between collections and cultural, natural, religious, political, and identity aspects, as well

## 1.1 Natural history museums as ethnographic museums

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as the importance of contextualising materials. As this work focuses on understanding how colonial narratives can be highlighted in a natural history museum, it is helpful to pay particular attention to the VI content of the ICOM guidelines, which indicates the importance for museums to engage with the artefacts' communities of origin and local communities, to engage in dialogue with them, and to be prepared to return cultural objects in an impartial manner (ICOM, 2017).

ICOM has also established different offices for the different needs and roles of museums to develop more specific overviews and guidelines. One branch of ICOM focuses on natural history museums - the Committee on Natural History Museums and Collections (NATHIST). The definition "natural history museums" indicates all institutions that collect, display and research materials from the "natural world" (ICOM NATHIST). In addition to the Code of Ethics, ICOM also provides specific guidance for these types of museums. In particular, it states that institutions should ensure the preservation of organisms and the collection of as much information about them as possible - general data, species, date and place of collection, etc. - and should establish guidelines for the respectful and dignified display of non-human animal remains (ICOM, 2013).

As far as ethnographic museums are concerned, the International Committee for Ethnographic Museums and Collections (ICME) is the responsible ICOM branch. Its guidelines state that museums are places where it is possible to educate and encourage people to think about many issues, including injustice and discrimination. To do this, it has become necessary to acknowledge the presence of deeply rooted racist and colonialist narratives - especially after the Black Lives Matter movement and its impact on societies (Haeckel, 2021; ICME, 2020). ICME encourages museums to examine their ethnographic collections and the relationship between the museum and the communities about which it speaks and holds objects. To highlight the power and oppression that is ultimately exercised between different societies, there is also an emphasis on examining the provenance of material, not only from a geographic perspective - where it came from, what community, what era - but also exploring how it was obtained (ICME, 2020).

It should also be remembered that museums have evolved and diversified over time, with some moments when change was particularly relevant. Generally, in the beginning, museums were places of education and a product of the male middle class and their interests, while today they are seen as places of service to the community (MacKenzie, 2010). In other words, they have transformed from expressions of aristocratic and middle-class views to places of dialogue for a broader audience - passing through centuries of colonialism, nationalism, and globalisation (Ünsal, 2019). As Western academia saw itself as the pinnacle of knowledge and development, museums eventually represented other cultures



**Figure 1.1:** Illustration by F. Imperato, *Dell'Historia Naturale* (Naples 1599). This is considered the first record of a natural history cabinet. From Simmons & Snider (2012).

only through their material products (Alpers, 1995). This idea of being better is also evident in the differentiation that took place in museums with the formation of different types of museums. Some museums were particularly characterised by a strong tendency to celebrate: Natural history museums celebrated Western man, art museums honoured Western masterpieces, and history museums celebrated Western military victories (Weil, 1997).

As far as natural history museums and their exhibitions are concerned, the growth of collections and exhibitions over the last hundred years hasn't been accompanied by a strong departure from the "Victorian cabinet" scheme (Krishtalka & Humprey, 2000). These cabinets, also known as "cabinets of curiosities" or *Wunderkammern*<sup>1</sup> ("wonder rooms"), can be defined as collections of natural history specimens, tools, inventions, rarities, etc., designed to teach, create, and share a universal approach to science (Figs. 1.1 and 1.2). In general, they contained *naturalia*, i.e., natural collections, and *artificialia*, i.e., human-made objects acquired by explorers and conquerors to demonstrate their power and wealth (Omedes & Páramo, 2018). Originally, in the 16th century, they were private spaces for collecting rare or bizarre specimens of natural history or artefacts. They were a Western product that was able to invalidate the relationship between nature and culture by juxtaposing natural and human-made objects (Amselle, 2017) and giving equal importance to the owner and the display (Greenblatt, 1995). Thanks to the

<sup>1</sup>Term popularised by Julius von Schlosser's book *Die Kunst- und Wunderkammern der Spätrenaissance. Ein Beitrag zur Geschichte des Sammelwesens* ("The art and curiosities of the late Renaissance. A contribution to the history of collecting") from 1908.

## 1.1 Natural history museums as ethnographic museums

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**Figure 1.2:** The *Wunderkammern* recreated in the G. L. Natural History Museum of Venice. Cabinets are filled with stuffed non-human animals, models of anatomic elements and rocks. Photo by Matilde Spagnolo.

landing in America, European naturalists of the 16th century considered it essential to revise the knowledge that had been circulating until then to include New World species, which led to a proliferation of specimens (Olm, 2018). At that time, naturalists were physicians or pharmacists dedicated to the study of nature (Pomian, 2021). According to Foucault, 1657 can be considered the year of the emergence of “natural history” itself; in that year, the Polish scholar and physician Johannes Jonstonus published *Historiae Naturalis de quadrupedibus*, the precursor of the systematic classification proposed by Carl Linnaeus (1707-1778). Subsequently, natural history underwent further changes through figures such as the French naturalist Georges Cuvier (1769-1832) and the English naturalist Charles Darwin (1809-1882), who initiated the transition from natural history to biology (Alberch, 1997). Moreover, between 1680 and 1720, thanks to Newtonian physics and the correlation between natural phenomena and divine action, changes occurred in scientific fields - first in England and then throughout the European continent (Pomian, 2021).

All of this led to a multiplication of 17th century cabinets and museums. Another major change affecting cabinets was their opening to the public (Lugli, 1992; Star & Griesemer, 1989). With the transition from private to public collections, the boundary between art and science became clearer due to the need for organisational processes and the division of materials, spaces, and disciplines (Olm, 2018). Because the *Wunderkammern* were already capable of holding different types of objects, they were particularly well

suited to natural history museums and their systematic view of the world - for example, by dividing them into botany, zoology, and mineralogy. The *Wunderkammern* became increasingly popular in Europe between the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. As they evolved from purely private to public collections, they also took on a “performative” character to attract and excite more people (Mackenzie, 2010). Beginning in the *XVIII* century, scientific and taxonomic specialisation increased at a dizzying rate, leading to the creation of the great natural history museums still found today in Europe and North America. The new museums are thus seen as instruments for deepening and organising knowledge about nature, and scholars eventually redefined their ideas about the usefulness of the museum for scientific research (Findlen, 1997). In the nineteenth century, the idea of a public museum for modern science also emerged in Italy: the first such institution, the *Instituto delle Scienze* in Bologna, opened, and botanical gardens proliferated. Especially in Veneto, the state of natural history changed earlier than in other regions: one example is the founding of the botanical garden of the University of Padua in 1733. In other parts of the country, the impact on institutions is more evident in the last decades of the century, as authorities became more interested in archaeology (Findelen, 2018; Pomian, 2021).

The peak of the performative and public aspect took place in the 19th century, when the fusion between natural and artificial elements also took place. Moreover, the museum in the 19th century is characterised by being even more of a point of contact between scientific discourse and popular understanding (MacKenzie, 2010). Exhibitions of the time were met with great response from the public, who were fascinated by the novelties, oddities, and proposed provocations - a feature also found in human zoos (Han-ying, 2012), which will be discussed later.

Especially between 1880 and 1920, museums became larger and more cathedral-like. In addition, beginning in the 1920s, museums increasingly opened to exhibits on astrophysics, Earth Science, biology, and ecology, and they were renovated to accommodate these new types of knowledge (Johnson, 2018). Finally, in the second half of the *XX* century, museums transformed from places of research to places of exhibition. Research was primarily conducted by universities (Turgeon & Dubuc, 2002), allowing museums to become eligible as new areas of social studies (Handler, 1993; Macdonald, 2001). In particular, after World War II and especially from the 1960s onward, strong social movements emerged, such as the anti-war, civil rights, women’s, and student movements. These demonstrations complemented and were also fed by the burgeoning debate around the new postcolonial nations. In the 1990s, the fall of the Berlin Wall, the end of apartheid in many nations, the emergence of national consciousness, the creation of the European

## 1.1 Natural history museums as ethnographic museums

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**Figure 1.3:** The passage room of the Venetian museum, in which different elements are classified. Photo by Matilde Spagnolo.

Union, and more all contributed to the rethinking of the concept of citizen and citizenship in an increasingly multicultural perspective, which also influenced museum practices (Kirshenblatt-Gimblett, 2005).

Although they have a relevant history behind them, natural history museums over time have maintained the general style of systematic display, with mainly written labels, symbols, and objects displayed behind a glass divided into disciplines - e.g. botany and zoology -, middle groups - e.g. plants and fishes - or units - e.g. species (figure 1.3). Specimens are typically viewed *tokenistically*, as indicators of a type of non-human animals, plants, etc., and for this reason they are not usually contextualised from a biographical perspective (Carnall, Ashby & Ross, 2013). In more traditional museums, “realistic physical perception” - the shape, size, and colour of the objects - are displayed, but nowadays they can also be surpassed by those conveyed by television or high-resolution colour prints. These perceptions do not usually include social or natural meanings, which creates a *museological presumption* among visitors: the assumption that objects can speak a non-verbal language on their own and are thus active agents in museums’ narratives. Instead, there is always a mediation that incorporates ideologies and views of those who organise exhibitions: how information is given, how objects are displayed, which artefacts are shown and which are not (Miles & Tout, 2000).

Today more than ever, as demonstrated by the interest of the ICOM itself, museums are called to play a social role towards challenges such as colonialism, gender equality,



climate change, anthropocentrism, and environmental crisis. In the words of Lynch and Alberti (2010), museums should become “third spaces” where different groups of people are equally alien and in this way can participate equally. However, because they are born with a mission and share views on different issues, museums are not neutral spaces. They can still use techniques and approaches to fulfil their mission without imposing ideologies or hiding interests as they engage in broader actions and narratives. Unlike public institutions, traditional organisations, and the mass media, museums are still viewed positively as institutions by many citizens. For this reason, museums could use their credibility as places where citizens can be helped to analyse and understand what is happening in contemporary societies (Garlandini, 2018). Museums should therefore be vibrant and dynamic places where people can engage with, explore, and interpret the present while becoming a part of it themselves. This will help people learn to listen to *Others* and let them have their say, turning away from ventriloquist/extractivist discourses of a dominant society or culture to allow and support other active speakers, leading to personal and collective enrichment. Because museums are spaces that are also associated with politics (i.e., the ability to decide what should be done) and power (i.e., the ability to get things done), their decisions can play a *transformative* role not only in embracing social and political change, but beyond (Biscottini & De Curtis, 2021). In this sense, the role of museums as actors through which colonial narratives can be overcome is central to applying decolonial lenses to museum collections. In other words, museums are sites where social justice can be produced. This can be done, for example, through two factors: redistribution and recognition. The first factor is justice towards poverty, marginalisation, disadvantage, inequality, exploitation, and class differences. The second factor is justice against disregard, imperialism, ignorance, domination and hierarchy. Both are necessary for radical, genuine, and meaningful social justice that encompasses socioeconomic, cultural, and symbolic aspects (Kinsley, 2016)<sup>2</sup>.

The Cambridge University Museum of Archaeology and Anthropology (CUMAA), for example, has undertaken a number of projects in collaboration with members of cultural groups in the museum collections. In 1993, the Pachyu shaman Yarjung Kromchhain Tamu was selected to collect and organise the Nepalese Tamu Shamans exhibit (fig. 1.4). The - almost - equal role and power between him and the museum ended in a mutual success: Yarjung was able to explain shamanic practices himself, and the museum had visitors who better understood the objects and their practice. The trade-offs were also mutual: Yarjung gave up the objects but retained ownership of those that might be needed in the future, and the museum approached non-exclusive ownership of the materials and

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<sup>2</sup>Her argument is based on Fraser’s (1995, 2007) and Fraser’s and Honneth’s (2003) two-dimensional theory of social justice.

## 1.1 Natural history museums as ethnographic museums

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**Figure 1.4:** Yarjung Kromchhain Tamu while organising the exhibition. 1993. *In Museums, politics and representation* by A. Herle (1997).

the idea of using what was behind the glass. In this way, the line between anthropology, history, and art museums was also blurred (Herle, 1997).

Thus, a good example of understanding and contextualising museum practices with a view to improving them could be the model proposed by Welsh (2005). In his view, every museum has two dimensions: domains and circuits. The former are the relationships between museums, institutions and visitors, while the latter are the relationships between museums and time. The domains are materiality<sup>3</sup>, representation<sup>4</sup>, and engagement<sup>5</sup>, which are interdependent and interrelated. The circuits are what museums have been, are becoming, and might become: they never “are”, they always “become” because they are in a web of evolving relationships and worlds. Thus, the timeline is not made up of past, present, and future, but of many “now”, many “dynamic state[s] of becoming”. The correlation between domains and circuits creates the configurations of a museum (fig. 1.5), which help to define “a dynamic conceptual space for reflecting and imagining how museums position themselves in the world”. In defining each position, a museum could be able to reflect on and analyse its role, actions and narratives. Regarding what museums have been, they were *repositories* of valued things (also connected to the concept of

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<sup>3</sup>Human ability to modify the surroundings for a purpose. It is not the mere object, but everything that the senses perceive. It is the conditions in which a museum works.

<sup>4</sup>The extension of information got from a museum’s work.

<sup>5</sup>How museums and people relate, creating in parallel the image of the museum.

Configurations			
Circuits	Domains		
	Materiality	Engagement	Representation
Have been	Repositories	Educational	Celebratory
Are becoming	Stewards	Learning centers	Collaborative
Could become	Conceptual	Complicitous	Reflexive

Figure 1.5: Configurations of museums. From Welsh (2005)

authenticity), *educational* on sharing knowledge, and *celebratory* to themselves through their objects. Regarding what museums *are becoming*, they are *stewards* of the new concept of object ownership (as a way to establish new relations), *learning centres* through engagement and new transmissions of knowledge, and *collaborative* with working groups, activities and other agents of representation. Regarding what museums *could become*, they could be *conceptual* about materiality, *complicitous* in sharing different experiences in a complex world, and *reflexive* of knowing that everyone has a personal story, approach and view. In summary, this organisation helps in defining the conceptual reflections that museums can use for self-analysis of their methods, approach and position towards different topics.

Since the Giancarlo Ligabue Natural History Museum of Venice has a natural history part *and* an ethnographic one, both of these types of museums need to be taken into consideration: the rooms are spaces where ethnography natural science strongly overlap. An example of questioning the narrative at work in ethnographic and natural history museums is the consciousness of how the Western representations of non-Western cultures were done, imposing the dichotomy of nature-culture that was not always present in other societies (Livne, 2016) and putting non-Western people on the side of Nature (Oliveira, 2016) creating Western narratives, considered the only possible and valid, in the museum practices.

## 1.2 Colonialism and museums

Universal scientific knowledge is based on Western knowledge because the West had the power to impose its own methods and bind the rest of knowledge to *beliefs* or *subordinate knowledge*. From the *Institut de Recherche, d'Etude et de Formation sur le Syndicalisme et les Mouvements sociaux*, some concepts are underlined, among which I would like to mention those of Epistemicide and *Cognitive extractivism*: the first indicates the delegitimisation of subaltern knowledge, the second indicates the practice of not quoting “periphery” thinkers, and therefore making them invisible. These are some of the practices that over time have led to the dominant Western view and mentality,

## 1.2 Colonialism and museums

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whose representative is Cartesian thinking based on binomials such as nature/culture, self/other, and man/woman. This thinking is exclusivist in that it creates defined boxes into which any aspect may or may not belong. Moreover, concepts such as progress, development, encounter, and evolution are also Western in origin, as they reflect a vision of a linear before and after, a back and forth: *the West and the Rest*, in fact, think that the *the West*, which is further, will be reached by the *Rest*, which is behind but wants to advance, to develop, to evolve. In this way, the First World and the Third World or the “developing” and the “underdeveloped” countries are created (Borghi, 2020). The concept of Orientalism is another construct created by creating an Orient as a political reality through the lens of essentialism (a product that cannot change), otherness (it is opposed to the characteristics of the West), and absence (of Western concepts such as reason and order). This was made possible by world exhibitions in which the *Other* was shown - and manipulated - to create the *Self*, the national Western identities. This “external reality”, as Mitchell defines it, is the most common object of exhibitions: a product of and for modern Europe, but one that does not correspond to reality (Mitchell, 2018). Moreover, as Ivan Karp points out, the fact that museums are sites of knowledge and object accumulation leads them to be key institutions in ideological production in many countries: this contributes to visitors actively interpreting exhibitions according to their culture, values, and ideologies (Karp, 1995). These considerations can help avoid what Bond has called the *plunder sign* of museums - including ethnographic and natural history museums (Bond, 1995).

Natural history museums, in particular, played a key role in disseminating ideologies and evidence for maintaining the social status quo of Western elites and subgroups (Coffee, 2008), through representations and omissions. Some objects were seen as “natural”, others as “cultural”, based on their origin rather than their form. In the nineteenth century, ethnographic collections could be displayed in the same place as natural history collections to represent “primitive and uncivilised” indigenous peoples who were unable to create anything on the same level as Westerners (Bennett, 1995). In addition, the *tone* of a museum often depended on the type of funders that supported it: the American Museum of Natural History, for example, was funded by people interested in eugenics, conservation, and capitalist society, which affected the policies, funds and visions the museum pursued in its work (Haraway, 1984-1985).

The exhibition galleries of ethnographic museums usually feature objects from ethnographic expeditions that took place at the turn of the 19th and 20th centuries. Efforts to catalogue, classify, and arrange these objects led to the creation of the classifications used in anthropology. The museum, originating from the “West”, still follows the logic of

“butterfly collections” in classifying its objects. This terminology of the British anthropologist Edmund Leach (1910-1989) refers to an evolutionary approach that contrasts the artistic object as a representation of a universal beauty with the ethnographic object as an example of a specific culture. In this way, the distinction between art (aesthetics) and manufactured goods (ethnography) emerges: The former are associated with the West and therefore exhibited and purchased, while the latter are reduced to bearing witness to the characteristics of “primitive” cultures and are therefore deprived of beauty. Amselle (2017), who also follows the idea that cultures depend on both external and internal forces (Amselle, 1999), proposes to replace the “ethnological logic” (classifier) with the “mestizo logic” in order to weaken the cultural boundaries of fixed identities and create continuity, connections: the specificity of each culture results from the encounter and exchange with other cultures and this potentially leads to features of universality and interculturality. In this way, the focus shifts from differences (ethnological logic) to commonalities (mestizo logic). Consequently, the idea of de-westernising museum practises must undergo a contemporaneity in order to not only be a place for the accumulation and display of objects, but to transform into a *museum of society*. However, contemporaneity is given by how a museum chooses its layout, its programmes, its themes - such as colonial history and gender issues - and its narratives. It can therefore be said that the museum itself is the agent that creates contemporaneity: it symbolises the highest form of contemporary alienation, as a box that encloses the identity of individuals, cultures and memories within “heterotopias”. With this description, Amselle recalls Foucault, who used the term to indicate that (1986: 24):

“[t]here are also, probably in every culture, in every civilisation, real places - places that do exist and that are formed in the very founding of society - which are something like counter-sites, a kind of effectively enacted utopia in which the real sites, all the other real sites that can be found within the culture, are simultaneously represented, contested, and inverted. Places of this kind are outside of all places, even though it may be possible to indicate their location in reality. Because these places are different from all the sites that they reflect and speak about, I shall call them, by way of contrast to utopias, heterotopias.”

This concept of “heterotopias” is used by Foucault to describe mirrors and cemeteries, but also museums, as the possession of artworks from the colonial period is particularly relevant. Consequently, the search for a universality of the museum is not only possible through its geographical delocalisation - as in the cases where branches are created in the

## 1.2 Colonialism and museums

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Arab world, such as the Louvre Abu Dhabi in the United Arab Emirates - but requires a real decentralisation, from all points of view. However, the heterotopia of the museum is also heterochrony, that is, an act of subtraction of time. The term, originally used in biology<sup>6</sup>, was reinterpreted by Foucault in the 1967 lecture “Des espaces autres”, in which he examines the Western conception of time and its influence on hegemonies, reflecting on how narratives, power, and time are interconnected. It is the analysis of time - and its political and social role - that then produces history itself. Museums, libraries and archives, as accumulators of time, are “heterochronies”. Consequently, museums are the possibility of a new analysis of the past and new alternative futures. This avoids a single vision, narrative and interpretation of time - and thus of history (Amselle, 2017). As stated by Foucault (1986: 26):

“[I]n a society like ours heterotopias and heterochronies are structured and distributed in a relatively complex fashion. First of all, there are heterotopias of indefinitely accumulating time, for example museums and libraries. Museums and libraries have become heterotopias in which time never stops building up and topping its summit, whereas, in the seventeenth century, even at the end of the century, museums and libraries were the expression of an individual choice. By contrast, the idea of accumulating everything [...] belongs to our modernity. The museum and the library are heterotopias that are proper to western culture of the nineteenth century..”

Museum ethnography is also closely related to post-Enlightenment conceptions of personhood and culture, in which white and Western narratives - and privileges - were dominant over colonies, indigenous peoples and/or marginalised communities. For this reason, museum ethnography should engage in a critical debate about its role and agency in order to allow for other narratives and thus promote the democratisation of museum spaces and representations (Shelton, 1997). The colonial and nationalist roots of ethnographic collections raise several considerations: Are ethnological museums past their glory days? Must they disappear, having lost their original mission of reinforcing colonialism and racism?

In countries such as Australia, Canada, and the United States, the analysis of the affinity between a museum and a colonial approach - and thus the need to return materials - has been paramount since the 1980s, when indigenous epistemologies and ontologies

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<sup>6</sup>Two organisms with a similar evolutionary path can have differences due to their specific evolution, which ended in having different systems, organs or cell types - highlighting a certain autonomy. See also Treccani, “eterocronia”.

began to be enshrined in political and legal decisions. In contrast, in Europe, it is not yet as common to trace or expose the relationship of museums to the countries from which materials originate, and this distance stems not only from an unwillingness to interact, but also from a tendency to avoid the colonial histories of many countries (Schorch, 2020). Interestingly, then, it can be said that the nations that initiated a real reflection were not those that continued the so-called “scramble for Africa” (such as France, Germany, Italy, and the United Kingdom), but those in which violence occurred primarily against indigenous communities in their own territories. Moreover, the Paris Treaty did not provide good ground for the process of decolonisation and reflection on the consequences of the colonialist era: In the public debate and consciousness, colonialism is not touched or considered - until today. In general, Germany is considered the European country that has best engaged in decolonial practises, not only through strategies but also through the provision of resources (Savoy, Houénoudé & Guiseels, 2021). In contrast, Italy is one of the countries that does not analyse its colonial past as deeply due to social and political choices of forgetting. The main colonial actions started in 1890 (when Eritrea became an Italian colony) and ended in 1947 with the Treaty of Paris. However, it can be considered that the colonial experience also began in 1882, when the rights to the Bay of Assab (on the Eritrean part of the Red Sea) were acquired by the Depretis government, and ended in 1960, when the Italian flag was finally removed in Mogadishu (Somalia): This makes the colonial period one of the most stable and longest eras in the history of Italy. It reached its peak around 1936, when Mussolini sought an Italian empire: thus, when colonial practices are condemned, it is usually in connection with Mussolini and not with colonialism itself (Filippi, 2021).

Before the invasion of Ethiopia (1935), very few people travelled to the colonies, but after the Italian invasion, the situation changed and the so-called “*Mal d’Africa*” started to become part of Italian culture<sup>7</sup>. Moreover, in the 1930s, the idea of Africa as a land of sexual possibilities was suppressed by the denial of “interracial” sexual relations - with strong repercussions on the Italian perception of the figure of *the African*. For this reason, photographs of African women began to circulate less. Triulzi (2006) described the Italian approach to its colonial past as a *pendulum* swinging between the will to forget (or “colonial amnesia” - Wildenthal et al., 2008) and the will to relive past glories. The debate is still weak, and the idea of Italians as more tolerant and humane colonisers is still widely believed - the myth of “*Italiani, brava gente*”. The lack of awareness about the colonial past also creates a better ground for the feeling of cultural and racial

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<sup>7</sup>For Mbembe, the “*Mal d’Africa*” of the *XIX* century has evolved into the “*Mal d’Europa*” of the *XIX* century - meaning that the former colonised people go to the former colonies to avoid the consequences that colonialism has had on their countries.

## 1.2 Colonialism and museums

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superiority. Perceptions of historical events are also altered; for example, the role played by the consequences of Italian colonialism in the Ethio-Eritrean conflict of 1998-2000 is downplayed (Filippi, 2021). Today, the colonial power of the past is evident in the political decisions between Italy and its ex-colonies, as well as in the political history of the ex-colonies themselves. Therefore, it is important to advocate for a better understanding of the legacies of Italian colonialism and how they have shaped contemporary nations (Andall & Duncan, 2005; Labanca, 2005).

Regarding the relation between museums and colonialism, it is important to remember that the concept of “ethnicity” itself is an invention of colonial administrators and professional ethnologists, and that the concept of “race” replaced the concept of “nation” just as movements such as evolutionism, comparative naturalism, nationalism, and German Romanticism were spreading the idea of classifying and hierarchising different societies (Amselle, 1999). In this way, not only did representation become inadequate, but people were hierarchised and divided into culture/civilised/Western or savage/non-Western (Gossett, 2020). Colonialism can be present at different levels of the narrative, from the sourcing and selection of objects to be represented to the way they are represented, from an explicit one - through terminologies used, objects and images - to a hidden one - for example, at the sensory level. The analysis made by Classen and Howes (2006) highlights how a significant change occurred in European collections in the mid-19th century: while artefacts were touched and smelled by people until the 18th century, they were subsequently organised so that they could only be seen. This can be related to the classification of the senses into “lower” and “higher” senses, a division that was projected onto the racial distinction of the time. The “lower” senses were attributed to the body - smell, taste, and touch - while the “higher” senses - sight and hearing - were associated with the mind. Many philosophers and anthropologists of the 18th and 19th centuries subscribed to this categorisation of the senses, leading to the emergence of the anthropology of the senses in the 1990s, which sought to explore both sensory dimensions (Classen & Howes, 2006). Lorenz Oken, a German naturalist, biologist and philosopher (1779-1851), for instance, hierarchised the human races into the European “eye-man” (highest), the Asian “ear-man”, the Native American “nose-man”, the Australian “tongue-man” and the African “skin-man” (lower). In *Systema Naturae* (Carl Linnaeus, 1735), *Homo sapiens europaeus* is white and guided by intelligence, while *Homo sapiens afer* is savage and guided by whim. Moreover, the *Essay on the inequality of human races* (Arthur de Gobineau, 1853-1855) offers a classification of “human races” based on the proximity to non-human animals and the female sex, recalling representations like *Historiae naturalis et medicae Indiae orientalis* (Jacob de Bondt, 1658) where an orangutan is referred to as



the Wild Man (Timeto, 2020). The more this idea of diversity was insinuated, the more museums chose to rely on sight as a sign of civilisation: touch was therefore avoided - it was considered vulgar and uncivilised - and a calm and composed demeanour was increasingly required. However, the absence of a physical connection between the visitor and the collection limits the sensory meaning of the object and already implies a deprivation of social and environmental context. Museums “elevate” objects to artefacts or works of art, forcing them to increase and assume visual interest: as a result, there can be a dissonance between the way museums and visitors see objects and the way they are seen by those who made the objects (Alpers, 1995; Classen & Howes, 2006). Thus, museums work in harmony with their past, but not with the cultures represented: each glass thus becomes a tool for the ideological framing of an artefact that, thanks to its transparency, can be used visually without recognising all of its features (Classen & Howes, 2006). This elimination in favour of pure seeing is already a kind of colonisation, as the objects - already considered signs of conquest - are adapted to the colonialist narrative that prevents a multisensory experience. All this also happens in an arrangement that keeps the artefacts “in captivity”, locking them behind glass cases that prevent the dynamics that would bring visitors and collections and the world behind them closer. But it is this exchange between object and visitor, this multisensory experience, that could lead visitors to connect with - and identify with - the population from which the object comes. Interestingly, as Benedict notes, the word “monster” refers to a “passive exhibition” whether derived from the Latin word *monstrare*, “to show”, or *monere*, “to warn”, implying that it embodies a sense of display and/or risk (Han-ying, 2012). For this reason, the safe but effective contact between artefacts and Europeans contributed to colonisation, connecting different representations, dominations, and agencies (Feldman, 2006). Donna Haraway (1988) suggests a shift in the role of seeing. According to her, vision has changed from a prestigious sense to a morbid synonym for seclusion, highlighting how: “[t]he eyes have been used to signify a perverse capacity - honed to perfection in the history of science tied to militarism, capitalism, colonialism, and male supremacy - to distance the knowing subject from everybody and everything in the interests of unfettered power. The instruments of visualisation in multinationalist, postmodernist culture have compounded these meanings of disembodiment” (p. 581).

It should also be kept in mind that the explorers collected objects mainly for two reasons: to marvel (by detaching the objects from their context to talk about the distance between different cultures) and to collect relics (especially in the case of unusual or rare objects). Both reasons have the common goal of narrating the unknown through the collected objects when they are back home. Thus, collecting objects does not generally stem from a

## 1.2 Colonialism and museums

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desire to report on or study the cultures encountered, and indeed the ethnographic aspect of these collections was generally sparse and shallow, if not absent (Castelli, 2006). The lack of interest, as Amselle (2017) notes, could lead to the expression in museums of an *ethnographic present*, that is, the lack of a precise epoch of objects and artefacts, which are then juxtaposed without their biography. As Igor Kopytoff (1986) notes, objects - just like people - have different biographies, e.g., economic, political, social, cultural, and artistic. The overall meaning of an object therefore depends on which contexts are taken into account. According to Charles Saumarez-Smith, neither an object's biography nor the museum's contribution is unique; rather, it is how an object is inserted into the collection that gives the object and the museum character. A problem that arises from this dynamic is how to discern the true and deep meaning of an object. Indeed, it is not enough to pay attention to how to arrange it and how to describe it on the label, but it is necessary to take into account that the object is revised based on the visitor's experience and emotions. Ludmilla Jordava expresses this relevance of the visitor with the concept of the fetish, which is the object exhibited in a museum, subject to hyperbolic attention, "frozen in time and space". The museum "kills the object by displacing it from the life it was intended for", creating a suspension of temporality (Bjerregaard & Willerslev, 2016). The relationship between the visitor and the *Other*, represented by the museum, is thus mediated by the object, which leads to an identification "detached and interpenetrated at the same time" (Silverstone, 2000). Amselle (2017) also recalls the reflections of Lebanese artist Walid Raad, who juxtaposed the fetishisation of capitalist social relations and commodities (in the Marxist sense) with what happens to art that is commodified and imprisoned by the "white cube" of the museum - colonialist, Eurocentric, and racist: another case highlighting the correlation between colonialism, capitalism, and museum practises. According to Baxandall's interpretation (1995), the cultural elements - ideas, values, and goals - of an anthropological exhibition belong to three kinds of subjects: those who made the objects, those who display them, and those who view them. These are separate and autonomous from one another, but during the exhibition they are transposed into the visitor's experience in a transcultural space. Baxandall also highlights how the viewer ascribes symbolic meaning to the objects on display in museums, independent of the cultural mediation of the museum, but precisely because it falls within the authority of the museum - the so-called "museum effect". This concept can be related to the one proposed by Pearce: an object can serve both as an intrinsic sign and as a metaphorical symbol. The first case occurs when the object applies to a whole (of which it is a part), and the second case occurs when it is arbitrarily associated with elements to which it has no intrinsic relationship. Consequently, an object can become a

symbol when it is contextualised and takes on an immaterial or ideological value that is added to the material value it already has (Pinna, 2005). For this reason, I believe it is important to look more closely at the ways in which different spaces, media, and narratives confront the colonial past and how non-Western societies are represented. In doing so, it is necessary to analyse all types of representations, including those in museums, as these places were created to showcase different cultures and share knowledge.

Concerning African art, in particular, another danger is to compare it with Western art and make it a “distorting mirror” to feed the reassuring idea of a better, more developed, advanced West. This stems from the fact that, by evoking fears and sexual and sensory passions, African art becomes the regenerative drive to move a sclerotic, effete, exhausted, plastered, aseptic West (Amselle, 2017). Interestingly, prior to 1860, African objects already present in Italy were not given as much consideration. When the upheavals of 1848-1849 failed, some exiles went to North Africa, where there were some thriving Italian-speaking communities. Some of them - like Miani himself, who will be analysed in this paper - passed on what they had collected in Africa when they returned to Italy. Moreover, around 1850, non-European objects were considered products of primitive - almost prehistoric - societies, so they began to be well documented and described. Consequently, these objects became known to people (through museums) and helped to strengthen the expansion of the Western economic system. All these factors ended with the beginning of the so-called “heroic” discovery phase, which was the basis for colonisation, but also for new anthropological chairs in Europe. In Italy, the Museum of the Italian Colonial Institute, subordinated to the Ministry of Colonies - shared the view of the motherland and the colonies, where the heterogeneous collection of objects - from guns to non-human animals, from industrial products to *curiosities* - serves only to show places ready for conquest. In this view, the focus is not on the people who made the objects, but on the people who will be their next conquerors (Castelli, 1992). It can also be said that the non-neutral narrative that a museum creates in relation to memories and identities means that exhibition actions can lead to two deceptions. The first is that the *primitive* artist is not seen as an anonymous individual, but only as a representative of a culture (e.g. “aboriginal art”). The second is the deportation and uprooting of primitive art in order to exhibit it and adapt it to the economic, cultural, political and ideological situation of the new place where it is located. Africa, often perceived as a land that favours reflections and fantasies, remained the “dark” continent where Europeans had penetrated for exploration, colonisation and evangelisation - consequences of expansionism. The predatory, dominant, and aggressive attitude of Europeans towards the local populations compromised their identity and distinctiveness. The narratives were

## 1.2 Colonialism and museums



**Figure 1.6:** Races of Mankind. The British Empire Universities Modern English Illustrated Dictionary, 1914.

always made by Europeans for Europeans, often in an esoteric tone. Even the African landscape was a contrast between archaic charm and a sense of confusion and hostility. The mixture between seduction and repulsion, between eroticism and esotericism, is also evident in the selection of cultural phenomena and practises reported: Superficial analysis and special attention are given to the most *curious* and *strange* phenomena, even without any particular depth. The non-recognition of African values thus served to highlight the dehumanisation of Africans through colonial processes that led to their objectification as artefacts to be collected, catalogued and displayed (Surdich, 2006).

Finally, Western science's view of non-white people - especially black people - is also shaped by its view of non-human animals, such as their over-sexualisation and animalisation. In some cases, their body parts are compared to those of non-human animals - such as hair compared to fur. As Armstrong (2002) points out, using Spiegel's analysis, the association between non-human animals and slaves is a form of insult to many people in Western societies, whereas in many other cultures it was an honour. This is another example of the consequences of European Enlightenment colonialism: a way of victimising and somehow oppressing other cultures. Black people and non-human animals were also considered equal by science, which contributed to how non-human animals - and consequently violence against them - have been imagined since Aristotle (Gossett, 2020). Animal studies are thus tied to colonial studies because the very concept of *animal* is linked to other concepts based on colonial discourse, such as "the human", "the natural" and "the cultural" (Ingold, 1994). The correlation between the oppression of non-white people and non-human animals can be introduced with Frederick Douglass<sup>8</sup>' words in his

<sup>8</sup>American social reformer, abolitionist, and writer (1818-1895) who led the abolitionist movement in

book *My Bondage and My Freedom* (2014: 170): “I now saw, in my situation, several points of similarity with that of the oxen. They were property, so was I; they were to be broken, so was I”.

A more recent example is the exhibition “This is Africa” made by Yu Huiping and hosted in 2017 by the Hubei Provincial Museum in China. In these rooms, photographs of black people were next to typical African non-human animals like chimpanzees, baboons, and lions (Africa Rivista, 2017).

In general, racism continues today, and especially the more subtle forms - lower recognition of mental illness, lower wages, and ecoracism - are more difficult to detect. Coloniality made “whites” the *subject* and “non-whites” the *object*, leading to racialisation, a process that allows for the exclusion of bodies that move away from the reference point marked by *whiteness* (fig. 1.6). For this reason, it is not correct to equate phenomena such as anti-white racism or reverse racism with racism against non-white people, as the non-white power system does not exist on a global scale. Furthermore, the intersection of racism, colonialism, and sexism - and thus race, gender, class, and sexuality - creates a binary between the North, considered the man-civilisation-reason, and the South, considered the woman-wild-instinct (Borghi, 2020).

To sum up, it is known and shared nowadays that museums, as they have emerged and developed, can carry colonialist narratives. Understanding how the museum functions and interrogating its narratives are necessary steps in responding to the call for greater sensitivity to decolonial practices.

### 1.3 Non-human animals in Natural History Museums

During the Renaissance, non-human animals were viewed on the one hand as uncontrollable forces hostile to civilisation, but on the other hand as an important source of food, clothing, and medicine, as well as a means of representing human values in heraldry, emblems, and symbols. An example of the third use is Cesare Ripa<sup>9</sup>'s 1603 *Iconologia* (fig. 1.7), a representation of four continents (Europe, Asia, Africa, and America) through a spectrum of the relationship between nature and culture: Europe was the most civilised, the Americas the most barbaric (closest to wild nature). Being on the higher level, Europe was the only country represented with cultural achievements, while all others were defined by flora, fauna and geography. The non-human animals in the images were chosen not only because they were native species, but also as symbols of the (un)cultural conditions

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Massachusetts and New York

<sup>9</sup>Italian iconographer, writer and art historian (1555-1622)

### 1.3 Non-human animals in Natural History Museums

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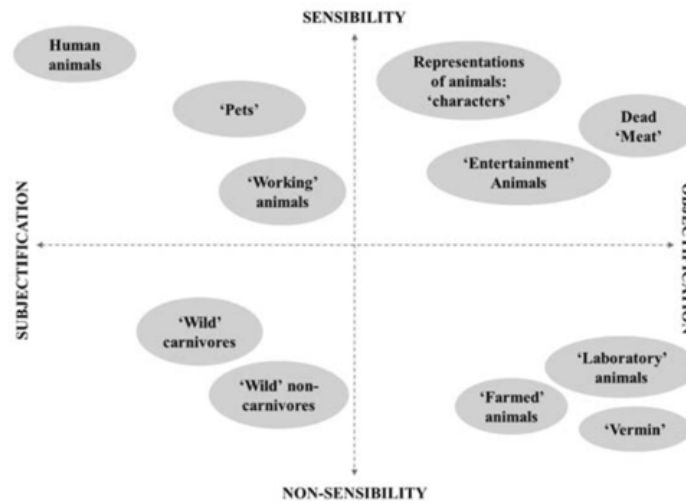


**Figure 1.7:** Iconologia by Cesare Ripa. Source: Lehigh University.

(Lazzaro, 2018).

Until the 19th century, the prevailing view was that of René Descartes, according to which non-human animals were machines created by God: they were not sentient, conscious and capable of conscious experiences, including pain. It was generally accepted that non-human animals were sentient and capable of suffering, but they were not considered rational, self-aware, capable of using symbols, or endowed with a soul (Francione, 2014). Today, it can be stated that there is a hierarchy even within non-human animals: mammals tend to be a more famous class than others in museums - with the possible exception of dinosaurs. Figure 1.8 of Stewart and Cole (2015) shows how the objectification of animals and sensitivity toward them have shaped the way human societies view and treat them: the highest level of sensitivity and subjectivity is found in human animals, while at the opposite pole are vermin.

As mentioned before, natural history museums are museums and therefore should deal with their colonial past, since they started from the idea of showing “oddities” and “distant worlds” and how extensive Western knowledge is. For this reason, comparisons were made between non-human animals and humans who are not European/white/Western. In this context, some reflections can be made on how colonialism was influenced by the distinction



**Figure 1.8:** Map of how “other” animals are constructed on a social level. In *The creation of a Killer Species: Cultural Rupture in Representations of ‘Urban Foxes’ in UK Newspapers* by Stewart K. and Cole M.

between human and non-human animals - and the resulting superiority -, and the impact of Western values on indigenous knowledge and material cultures. These concepts also bring to mind the concept of *agency* and the role that various actors - in this case, non-human animals - play in shaping the environment and history (Armstrong, 2002).

According to the Code of Ethics for Natural History Museums prepared by ICOM, organisms are mainly divided - also at the legal level - mainly into non-human animals, humans, plants and invertebrates. In general, it is recommended to collect as much data as possible and to limit the alteration of specimens. Different types of remains require different handling, precautions, and preservation. Human remains, in particular, provide the most specific information about their arrangement and management, in part because of the possible presence of descendants able to claim to the bodies - a possibility not usually considered for non-human animals. Human remains raise many ethical issues, and thus many figures such as archaeologists, anthropologists, bioethicists, and museum curators are involved in the debate over whether, how and where they should be displayed to keep their dignity and culture (Licata *et al.*, 2020). ICOM considers human remains - and sacred materials - as “culturally sensitive materials” while excluding non-human animal remains, thus perpetuating an anthropocentric approach to them. However, some of them may be part of the religious or spiritual sphere of a community, so this classification would not allow recognition of their cultural value apart from their purely “biological” value. ICOM also divides non-human animals into three categories: fossils, living animals and stuffed animals. Fossils are managed on the basis of indications that apply to rocks and minerals. For live animals, instructions are required to ensure appropriate living and

### 1.3 Non-human animals in Natural History Museums

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**Figure 1.9:** “Diorama of buffalo being mauled by a lion”, Gallery 3 of the Powell-Cotton Museum. Copyright, Hedley Basford. Courtesy of the Trustees of the Powell-Cotton Museum. In Philp (2016).

display conditions. For the handling of stuffed animals, there are not many indications, except for the indication of the species, the taxidermist, and the main actions performed on the remaining animals - these indications can be found in the ICOM appendix dedicated to taxidermy and cultural heritage.

Taxidermy (from the Greek 'taxis', *order*, and 'nomos', *law*) can be considered a technical art that can be used for decorative, educational, or research purposes. It mainly depicts non-human animals, considering nature both as an object of action (the stuffed individual) and as a means: just as some cultural objects are used to talk about certain societies, taxidermic objects are used to show certain types of nature or species - mainly for a visual experience. However, each object is a result of being made for a specific purpose, in a certain place, and at a specific time. In the nineteenth century, taxidermy was a means of reinforcing the idea of a classification system of the world. In the twentieth century, it was mainly used to model non-human animals to include them in the reproduction of their habitats, with an emphasis on ecology rather than classification - as shown in the following example (fig. 1.9). Since the goal was to create as real a situation as possible, taxidermy techniques for studying movements, expressions, and behaviour gained prominence during this period (Philp, 2016). In his book *The Afterlives of Animals* (2011), Alberti explains how the purpose of taxidermy is to create the illusion of life, where, following Sabin, the death of the living being is the birth of the specimen. In this way, however, taxidermy leads *museums* to become *mausoleums* of dead finds in drawers and jars.



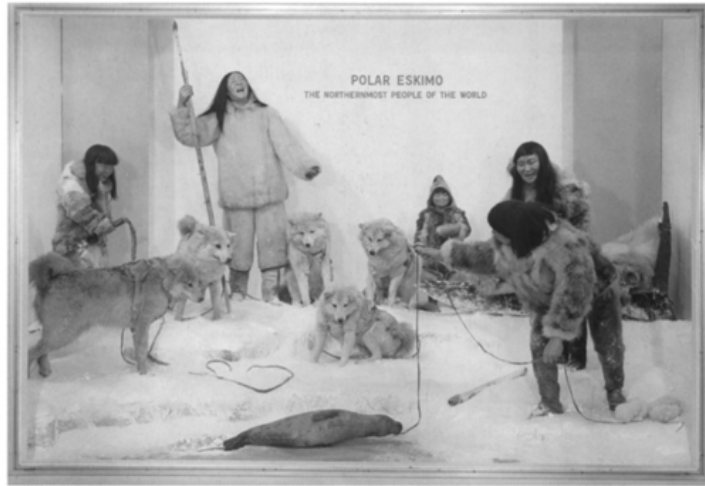
In terms of the arrangement, management, and display of non-human animals, Animal Studies examines how museums and naturalistic collections were and are influenced by a colonial approach. One example is Haraway's commentary on the American Museum of Natural History with a focus on African Hall (1984-1985). According to the author, themes of democracy, manhood, nature, and adventure permeate the visit, making the exhibit more about American culture than the African continent. Furthermore, Haraway emphasises that the representation of a pristine, perfect and pure nature overlooks the fact that the concept of nature is a human invention. By describing and analysing her itinerary and several biographies - the Teddy Roosevelt Memorial, the architecture of the museum, the arrangement of the rooms, and the figures of Roosevelt and Akeley - Haraway also underscores how this museum is shaped by its creation toward the narrative intended for white boys. As seen in both this article and Cadamuro's (2018) dissertation, hunting and travel in Africa were often seen as rites of passage to adulthood and entry into the scientific community. Haraway also highlighted how the taxidermist Akeley referred to adult male Africans as *boys*, except when speaking of the lion spearmen who were considered *men* during his hunts. In addition, Akeley took a white woman on the expedition just because proving that a woman could also hunt made the hunt less attractive, thus preserving wildlife: in this way, the concept of "(male) hunting" is transformed by the taxidermist from something positive (masculinity, courage) to something negative (threat to conservation). Haraway also highlights the connection between the camera and the rifle in this section - which will be explored further in Chapter 3. The representations of the African continent that were created were only through dioramas and taxidermy (a stage, a "servant of the real"), thanks to the fact that non-human animals were killed and rearranged according to the needs of the museum: specimens in excellent condition and possibly a large male, one or two females and a baby so that they can form a perfect family. Dioramas generally depict the boundaries between species, geographic organisation, and the absence of humans in nature (Henning, 2006). For this reason, Akeley considered a specimen more important if it was perfect and an adult male: only when he had such an individual would he obtain others of a different species. These considerations led Haraway to set forth how the museum responded to the decadence of imperial, capitalist, and white culture: through exhibitions *to arrest decay*, through eugenics *to ensure racial purity*, and through conservation *to preserve resources* [...] for the achievement of manhood. Decadence, then, is a disease of an organism - and, in Stars and Griesemer's words, of the museum itself - and its "hygiene would give way to systems engineering as the basis of medical, religious, political, and scientific story-telling practices". In this way, the author links various aspects of museum practises and personal biographies of people enmeshed

### 1.3 Non-human animals in Natural History Museums

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in a web of capitalism, racism, and speciesism. Like racism and sexism, speciesism is a symbol of oppression: in this case, prejudice against non-human animals ends in their systematic sacrifice (Merskin, 2015). Human superiority - and thus oppression - over non-human animals began 50,000 to 90,000 years ago with the killing of large non-human animals, but it was not until 10,000 years ago that the relationship became violent and exploitative through the (patriarchal) practise of agriculture, which led to the confinement, selection, exploitation, and killing of non-human animals such as horses, pigs and cows through the process now known as domestication. In this sense, the oppression of non-human animals by humans is not natural (Nibert, 2015). What Carol J. Adams defines in her book *The sexual politics of meat* (1990) as an “absent referent” in the world of food could be reinterpreted as a stuffed animal in a museum: just as the separation between what is eaten (“meat”) and what it was (“individual”) allows one not to think about the violence used - and so the deaths of non-human animals are *absent* - so the fragmentation of the body in stuffed animals (“trophies”) reduces the idea of them as what they were (“individuals”) - and the act of killing *disappear*: reality and representation thus end up in dissonance. This dissonance can only be achieved through a prior *objectification* of non-human animals: an objectification that is both physical (their totality) and ontological (their meaning) (Adams, 2015). To quote Cudworth, “[a]nthroparchy facilitates the division of meat into pieces, fragments, presented to the viewer as objects of desire” (2018: 314). The predatory act of eating meat is so repurposed into the predatory act of killing, collecting and showing dead non-human animals for pleasure - as in this case the individuals are eaten with eyes and not with the mouth, recalling the hierarchy of senses previously mentioned. In summary, using the words of Aph Ko in her book *Racism as zoological witchcraft* (2019), “conceptual violence precedes physical violence. You must be thought of as an inferior subject before your body is used, abused, manipulated, and consumed. [...] Before animals are stuffed into zoos or turned into taxidermied pieces to be mounted on walls, they are conceptually conceived of as bodies designed for compulsory elimination”, and taxidermy thus “is not just about displaying animal corpses on walls but is simultaneously a display of power and racial value systems” (p. 76).

In addition, other types of exhibits also contribute to shaping the view of non-human animals. Human zoos were places where the animalisation of Afro-descendant people was practiced by exhibiting them alongside non-human animals (Gossett, 2020). From the mid-19th to the mid-20th century, human zoos and colonial exhibitions were common practice in Europe, and they involved indigenous peoples being displayed in their “natural habitats” to highlight their closeness to nature -and thus their distance from civilisation and modernity of Europe. This type of diorama often featured non-human animals, both



**Figure 1.10:** “Polar Eskimo, the Northernmost People of the World”. Diorama. National Museum of Natural History, Washington DC, 1957. Smithsonian Institution Archives. Image MNH-035. In Oliveira, 2016.

to magnify their context - such as the addition of sled dogs alongside Eskimo peoples (fig. 1.10) - and to denigrate them - as when Ota Benga was crammed in with chimpanzees and orangutans for comparison with apes (fig. 1.11). This kind of exposure of these people reinforced the idea that they were not fully human, which made it easier not to condemn genocide and violence against them. The last human zoo exhibition is considered to be the one that took place in 1958. There are many reasons for the decline of this type of exhibition: lower interest of the public, better forms of entertainment, and the idea that civilisation’s mission was on the cutting edge. However, reducing critical issues to almost zero risks limiting the view of the phenomenon without recognising its impact on socio-political changes at the time (Oliveira, 2016). Furthermore, the definition “human zoo” sheds light on the animalisation, racialisation and commodification that those involved faced: human zoos were complex events that fed off of the Western sense of superiority, and their display in major exhibitions provided them with enough publicity to reinforce their role in racial ideology (Abbattista, 2015). Human zoos not only exhibited - and transported - people and non-human animals on equal footing, but they also served to reinforce the idea of diverse sexuality in the early 20th century. Africans, both sexually attractive and aesthetically repulsive, were considered less intelligent than white Europeans, and their sexuality was more direct, animalistic, and “inferior”. Women in particular were associated with sex and eroticism - for example, by the director of the Copenhagen Zoo, Schiøtt, who sought women who exuded sexuality for the exhibition (Andreassen, 2016).

Taking another step forward, in the book *Gender: Animals* (2017) Machin points out that “as places of scientific knowledge production, museum collections and displays can influence societal views of gender” (p. 263). Her analysis started from the gender stereo-

### 1.3 Non-human animals in Natural History Museums

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**Figure 1.11:** Ota Benga with a chimpanzee. ca. 1915 and 1916. George Grantham Bain Collection, Library of Congress. In Oliveira, 2016.

types that can be found in museums since their history was male-dominated: those who first developed, funded and visited museums were in fact mainly men. This still ends up today, and a study for example showed that parents explained three times more to boys than to girls at science exhibitions. Gender stereotypes can be also perpetuated through non-human animals in museums, and in analysing non-human animals some steps can be highlighted to notice how male dominance has influenced them.

First, non-human animals are dead. The act of killing was usually seen as a male action, while more “feminine” works were, for example, collecting botanical specimens - as also Haraway pointed out while talking about Akeley’s experiences.

Secondly, non-human animals were collected and chosen: male specimens were considered the standard for representing a species. It is thus easier to see a female specimen near the male version or the male alone, but it is harder to have the female alone as the indicator for a species. Moreover, the male is more present even in absence of sexual dimorphism<sup>10</sup>. This ends in having more male than female specimens. In general, as explained by J. C. Desmond in *Displaying Death and Animating Life* (2016), taxidermy is the act of generalising species using one or a few individuals - but only with species that are not *Homo sapiens*.

Thirdly, non-human animals were named: the taxonomy seems to reflect these stereotyping dynamics too. Some species names are based only on male characteristics (e.g. blackbirds, where only the male is black), and others contain references to the male sex in the name itself (e.g. *Tyrannosaurus rex* means “king tyrant-lizard” and *Homo sapiens*, “man the knowing”), thus making the “male” not a gender but the general (Borghini,

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<sup>10</sup>Condition where the sexes of the same species have different morphological characteristics.

2020). In this way, for example, the brown female blackbird ends up being unnoticed since it is not black, thus rendered invisible by taxonomy, and the term “man” is used as an equivalent for “human” but “woman” is not.

Fourthly, non-human animals were organised and exhibited: both the curators and the taxidermists were mainly men. Male specimens were usually shown in more aggressive or active postures, surrounded by juveniles and females. In general, non-human animals were performing their “animality” - in a human key (Desmond, 2016). Furthermore, even though homosexuality and bisexuality can easily be found across species, there are a few exceptions where the sexuality represented is not heterosexuality.

Finally, non-human animals were described: the male specimens are often described as owners of the female ones. Additionally, female specimens may be described as “mother” or female but it is rare that the male ones are described as “father” or that it is specified when the specimen is a male individual.

With this overview of the history of museum practices (particularly natural history), the relationship between museums and colonial narratives, the role of museums in contemporary societies, and the representation of non-human animals, I lay the groundwork for the analysis proposed in this thesis. These general conditions are used to better frame the case study, that is, the Giancarlo Ligabue Museum of Natural History in Venice, why it is important to analyse some of its rooms and how this could be done to interpret the museum’s contemporaneity in a post- and/or decolonial lens.

## Chapter 2

# The Natural History Museum of Venice and its trophy rooms

### 2.1 History and present organisation of the museum

Teodoro Correr (Venice, 1750 – 1830) was an important Venetian abbot and patrician. He took the vows in 1789, and this allowed him to focus on collecting and creating a private collection, which ended up being part of the current artistic and historical heritage of Venice still today<sup>1</sup>. During his lifetime, the collection was accessible twice a week under his watch. After Correr's death, the municipality of Venice received the Ca' Correr building and the entire collection was destined for the creation of a public civic museum following the patrician's desire: the Correr Civic Museum and the Correr Collection were thus funded in 1836. The collection was further enriched as requested by Correr himself in his will, who left large sums of money for this purpose. In this first phase, the scarce naturalistic collection was implemented: relevant to this goal were the acquisitions of the collections by Nicolò Contarini in 1849, Giovanni Miani in 1862, Alessandro P. Ninni from 1876, Giovanni Zanardini around 1878, and Giovan Battista Spinelli in 1880. After a few decades, the collections became so wide that the municipality of Venice decided to buy and restore the Fontego dei Turchi palace for locating there the historical and artistic collections, while the naturalistic collection would remain at Ca' Correr. Given the success of the Civic Museum, in 1920 the historical and artistic collections were transferred to the Doge's Palace and Procuratie Nuove, and the natural one was thus moved to the Fontego dei Turchi. The ethnographic and naturalistic exhibitions went to the empty Fontego dei Turchi according to the decision of the engineer Giorgio Silvio Coen (1873

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<sup>1</sup>CORRER, Teodoro Maria Francesco Gasparo. Treccani. [https://www.treccani.it/enciclopedia/teodoro-maria-francesco-gasparo-correr\\_\(Dizionario-Biografico\)/](https://www.treccani.it/enciclopedia/teodoro-maria-francesco-gasparo-correr_(Dizionario-Biografico)/)

- 1951)<sup>2</sup>, who founded the Museum of Natural History in 1923. Then the collections of the Istituto Veneto di Scienze, Lettere e Arti and other minor ones were added (Museo di Storia Naturale di Venezia Giancarlo Ligabue, n.d.a).

Today, the natural history museum is one of the eleven museums managed by Fondazione Musei Civici di Venezia, which deals with managing the museum heritage of the city of Venice. It was closed from 1996 to 2010 for a rearrangement, structural restoration and system adaptation. The museum then gradually reopened in two lots, in 2010 and 2011<sup>3</sup>. Despite the closures due to the COVID-19 pandemic, the museum claims an important number of visitors, which in 2022 were 81,000<sup>4</sup>. With the council n° 239 of July 24, 2019, the name changed from Natural History Museum of Venice to Giancarlo Ligabue Natural History Museum of Venice. The naming was proposed by the Councilor for Toponymy and had a unanimous vote in the municipal council. The new name is officially used since October 2019 (Città di Venezia, 2019). Giancarlo Ligabue (1931 - 2015) was a Venetian archaeologist, explorer, scholar and entrepreneur. He was the president of the museum from 1978 to 2008, donating around two thousand fossils and ethnographic finds. He also founded the Ligabue Research Center in 1973, today's Ligabue Foundation, which aims to promote studies and research in scientific and cultural fields.

As explained in the website, the museum currently has over two million pieces. In addition to the numerous and different finds that cover a period of about seven hundred million years, there is a library with approximately forty thousand monographs, two thousand five hundred periodicals, numerous 16th- and 17th-century publications, plus 19th-century manuscripts. On the ground floor, characterised by the skeletons of a fin whale and a sperm whale, the *tegnùe*'s aquarium<sup>5</sup> and the Cetaceans Gallery are located. On the first floor, there are 16 rooms divided into three parts.

The first one is called “On the tracks of life” and has mainly palaeontological and fossil elements. Along four rooms, it creates a journey through the origin and evolution of life on the planet, from the first single-cell organisms to the large animals present at the end of the glacial period and in the Italian and Veneto territories. The last small section is dedicated to *Homo sapiens*. One room is dedicated to Giancarlo Ligabue and his expedition in the Ténéré desert, in Eastern Niger. The expedition took place in 1973 in collaboration with Philippe Taquet, a palaeontologist from the Natural History Museum

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<sup>2</sup>COEN, Giorgio Silvio. Treccani. [https://www.treccani.it/enciclopedia/giorgio-silvio-coen\\_%28Dizionario-Biografico%29/](https://www.treccani.it/enciclopedia/giorgio-silvio-coen_%28Dizionario-Biografico%29/)

<sup>3</sup>From the interviews of January 11, 2023. Appendix A.

<sup>4</sup>Source: correspondence with the museum director.

<sup>5</sup>Bio-sediments similar to coral reefs which have developed in the sea bottom of the Gulf of Venice, in the northern Adriatic Sea. The name comes from the Venetian dialect word “held back”, since fishermen's nets were stuck and held by them. The aquarium is not present now, but it remains in the organisation explained by the museum.

## 2.1 History and present organisation of the museum

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**Figure 2.1:** Part of the comic “Dove fuggono i cammelli” (“Where the camels flee”) dedicated to the expedition in the Ténéré desert. Written by P. Zanotto and illustrated by A. Gattia (1973). From *L’esplorazione disegnata* by P. Zanotto.

in Paris. The excavations lasted about a month and began at the site of Gadoufaoua (“where the camels flee”, fig. 2.1), which was characterised by tropical forests and swampy areas due to the hot and humid climate of the Lower or Early Cretaceous (from 145 million to 100.5 million years ago). The fossils found were from that epoch and were later restored and studied in the Paris museum. The most important finds were the skeleton of *Ouranosaurus nigeriensis* (Taquet, 1976), the only almost complete present in Italy, and that of *Sarcosuchus imperator* (Broin & Taquet, 1966), the largest crocodile species ever existed (Archeologiavocidalpassato, 2019). These finds were exhibited in 1975, playing a key role in the revitalisation of the museum. Furthermore, the expedition was a turning point for Ligabue, since it led him to broaden his interest and work in palaeontology and made him a well-known figure in Italy (Fondazione Giancarlo Ligabue, n.d.).

The second part, “Collecting to astonish, collecting for research”, is dedicated to past and present explorers and collectors. The aim is to explore how collecting and scientific museology were born and evolved: from exhibitions with a strong aesthetic value (“*to astonish*”) to the ones with more scientific criteria (“*for research*”). It was therefore chosen to give more information on the spirit with which the collections were created rather than on the pieces present, leaving the visitor the pleasure of exploring through observation and suggestions, as explained during the interviews by the museum staff. The first rooms of this part are dedicated to “Venetian explorers, tales of travel, research and expeditions”, icons of different ways of collecting: the first room is dedicated to Miani, the second and third to de Reali, the fourth room to different collectors, and the fifth room to Ligabue. In particular, the Ligabue room is a more modern reading of scientific collecting, and scientific research is thus the protagonist through palaeontology, archaeology, ethnology and the natural sciences. Then, the second part “Museum and science” is about the history of museology: first a 15th-century *Wunderkammer*, and then the large hall of 19th-century museology, where curiosities disappear and the finds are organised according to the rigour of scientific classification to represent biodiversity



(Bon et al., 2016).

The third and last part is named “The strategies of life” and is arranged in six rooms. It hosts various examples of how living things have adapted and specialised to survive, both in water, air and on earth. The complexity is highlighted through differences and analogies between species.

## 2.2 The collections

As indicated on the website, the collections are the backbone for the museum’s activities, both didactic-educational and research ones. The collections can be branched into five main categories: botany, mycology, zoology, Earth science, and ethnography. The latter can be further divided into five ethnographic collections. The mention of who the collectors are is important in order to deeply understand the logic of the collections and the possible projection of the collectors’ ideologies into them (Turgeon & Dubuc, 2002).

The Ninni-Marella collection has more than two hundred pieces of boats and artefacts used for fishing in the Venice Lagoon in the second half of the *XIX* century. It also includes captions indicating their names in the local dialect, and watercolours on the various sails mounted on the fishing boats.

The Napoleone Forin collection is characterised by finds related to hunting trips collected in Somalia between 1959 and 1974. These finds are both zoological (like mammals as hunting trophies) and ethnographic (like weapons and tools). Among the mammals there are typical Somali species such as *Ammodorcas clarkei*, *Litocranius walleri sclateri*, *Beatragus hunteri*, *Madoqua saltiana lawrancei*, and *Gazella spekei*. Weapons include, for example, bows, quivers, arrows, spears, and knives (Rallo, 2000). It is important to mention that Italy showed interest in the Horn of Africa in the mid-19th century, and after the first colony in Eritrea (1882) it aimed to conquer Somalia as well. Known since ancient times as the Country or Land of Punt, at the time of the conquest Somalia was not a well-defined area, and above all its profound complexity was not known (Pandolfo, 2013). After working as an important naval base and port, the region was considered an Italian colony from 1936 to 1941, with the name of Somalia Governorate (Tripodi, 1999).

The Giovanni Miani collection presents ethnographic objects from the expedition in search of the sources of the Nile, as well as drawings, manuscripts and diaries of the explorer. Giovanni Giacomo Miani was born in Rovigo on March 17, 1810. In 1824 he joined his mother in Venice and received an education paid for by Pier Alvisè Bragadin, the nobleman for whom his mother worked. Upon the nobleman’s death (1829) they obtained his house - including the objects inside - and 18,600 Italian Lire. Thanks to this

## 2.2 The collections

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sum, in 1931 he managed to pay a young man to avoid military recruitment, allowing him to devote himself to studies including music, acoustics and theatre. He travelled between Naples, Malaga, Paris, Padua, Milan, and Rome. The period was also characterised by revolutions, and many Italians sought refuge in Africa as archaeologists, explorers, leaders, and missionaries (Rossi, 2006). Due to his participation in the revolts of 1848, Miani was exiled from Venice and thus travelled between Ravenna, Malta, Constantinople, Smyrna, Egypt, and Palestine (Pasqualini Canato, 2006). Also, like many others of his time, he had an interest in finding the sources of the Nile - in the end, he was not able to find them (Cimmino, 1985). Miani went on three trips to Africa. The first, from March 1859 to November 1860, took place mainly between Alexandria, Galuffi, Suez, and Cairo. The second, from December 1860 to October 1861, was in the areas of Bulacco, Wadi-Alfa, Dabba, and Khartoum. The third began in March 1871 (Khartoum, Manfa, Amamba, and Bankangoi areas) but it was interrupted earlier due to the death of Miani on November 21, 1872, for fatigue and fever in the Monbuttu province of Zaire (Pasqualini Canato, 2006). Miani himself described his travels in great detail: sunrise and sunset hours, compass directions, routes, events, and much more. He also created a short vocabulary of the Auidi language, encountered on one of his travels (Cimmino, 1985). In particular, he devoted himself to cartography, particularly from 1858 to 1865: although subject to some critics, his maps have a significant historical and cultural character as they illustrate, among other things, routes and tribes present at the time (Tajoli, 2006). This can be considered cognate to Romanticism and its effects: born in Germany and England in the late *XVIII* century, Romanticism was actually widespread in Europe at the beginning of the *XIX* century. In this movement, nature was seen as a place of purity, innocence and freedom. Moreover, a strong individualism led to the vision of the “brilliant”, “unique” and “free” individual. Interestingly, it was at the beginning of the 19th century that occurred the shift from the 17th-century Grand Tours, with heavy and big books for German or English young aristocrats who travelled to South European countries like Italy and Greece, to travel guides, for middle-class people who could thus afford to travel.

According to Lombardi-Diop’s analysis (2003), Miani’s expansionism can also be considered an example of the mercantile and imperialist economy in which “guns, rather than gifts, are the primary object of exchange”, as indicators of European imperial presence and conquests. Exchange of gifts as a rite to show power, superiority and possession of the territories was also indicated by the explorer himself in his diary: “I gave the Sultan an Italian flag to demonstrate how I was the first Italian to penetrate here” (*Ho donato al Sultano una bandiera italiana che dimostrerà come io sia stato il primo italiano pene-*

*trare*<sup>6</sup> *fin qui*”). Miani obtained arms and munitions from Napoleon III, as well as funds and diplomatic connections from French merchants. As a result, Miani’s success can be considered to be much favoured by goods and weapons rather than by established social ties.

As Castelli points out (2006), a collection must be examined taking into account the historical context and how the objects were acquired. For example, while returning through the desert from Khartoum, Miani bought objects without an idea in mind other than having objects from other areas besides the South-Nilotic one. The goal was to quickly return to Europe and obtain funds for the following expeditions. Furthermore, in several cases Miani confused the origins of some objects: his focus, therefore, was not so much on the accurate cataloguing as much as on the scenic organisation of these objects. This choice followed the romantic style previously introduced, where nature is seen more as a scene for the explorer’s feats and adventure stories. It also means that objects speak more of his persona rather than of the people from whom the objects were stolen<sup>7</sup>.

His focus on how objects should have been displayed can be seen in his diary, in which he wrote a series of notes on how he imagined the objects arranged. Since the diary was published in 1865, it is considered to be one of the - if not *the* - oldest European evidence of museographic installation in the ethnographic field. This indication was respected by the museum during the exhibition on the ground floor in the 19th century, and on the second floor in the 20th century. The collection that arrived at the Correr Museum on August 8, 1862, contains 1,800 objects: natural objects (such as minerals, logs and skins), clothes and costumes (like belts, headdresses and risers), weapons, industrial products (e.g. fabrics and musical instruments), ceramics and antiquities (human mummies, crocodiles, platypuses). By this nature, defining it only as ethnographic reduces its complexity. This feature of the collection served to show, once returning to Europe, the diversity he encountered. The heterogeneity was in fact used to “summarise” the characteristics of a place and to show how “far”, from a cultural point of view, Miani has gone, even if without necessarily having a deep knowledge of the place or the cultures that live there. Unfortunately, part of the collection disappeared in 1940 when, on loan to Naples, the Allies occupied the area<sup>8</sup> (Castelli, 2006). Furthermore, Miani’s original collection can be divided into a Roman (smaller) nucleus and a Venetian nucleus. The first nucleus, with finds from North-East Congo, was acquired upon death by the Italian

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<sup>6</sup>The verb to penetrate is interesting, as it can recall an act of sexual conquest, following the dynamics of the nation/woman to be conquered.

<sup>7</sup>However, the museum considered him an objective source of information, as can be read in the interview transcriptions.

<sup>8</sup>The author also refers that empty spaces were left in the museum exhibition for indicating the missing elements, but the museum staff denied this claim during the interview on November 29, 2022.

## 2.2 The collections

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Government and subsequently entrusted to the Italian Geographical Society and then to the Pigorini Ethnographic Museum in Rome. The second one went to the Venetian museum and it is considered the oldest European collection of African ethnography (Rossi, 2006). As confirmed by museum staff during interviews carried out, the exact number of objects in the collection is unknown since there are different catalogues of it and Miani himself was not accurate in reporting information. The museum, therefore, began a work of cataloguing and reorganising the materials, still ongoing.

The Giuseppe de Reali collection includes photographs, various objects (e.g. wood, metal, leather, and fibres) and numerous hunting trophies (like skins, busts and horns) from the “big hunts” carried out. It is, excluding those made by scientific institutions, one of the largest African collections in Italy created by a single individual, both in terms of quality and quantity of materials (Rallo, 1999). Count<sup>9</sup> Giuseppe de Reali (1877 - 1937) was a senator of the Reign and mayor of the municipality of Casier. Fascinated by the “big hunts” - popular among the central European and British nobility and bourgeoisie of the time -, he undertook twelve trips to Africa, including Northern, Saharan, Eastern and Equatorial Africa. In five of them, his wife Amelia Pigazzi de Reali (1871-[...]) accompanied him. His first trip took place between Egypt and Sudan in 1898. The second trip, in 1901, was to the Horn of Africa - mainly to Ethiopia and Eritrea. As previously mentioned, these areas were territories with a strong Italian influence and therefore it is not uncommon for explorers, missionaries and entrepreneurs to decide to start their travels from these areas. In 1904 de Reali went to Equatorial Africa - present-day Burundi, Rwanda, Tanzania, Mozambique, Kenya, Tanganyika, Ethiopia - through the regions of the Aghekuiu, Maasai and Wanderobe tribes. In 1907 he travelled to Kenya and Uganda, returning in 1908 via the Seychelles Islands. He then came back to Africa in 1912, 1920 and 1922 (mainly in the Horn of Africa). In 1925 he was in Morocco, Senegal, Guinea, Ivory Coast, Congo, and the current Central African Republic, in 1926 in Congo and the area of Lake Chad, and in 1927 in Libya. In 1929 he went again to Libya, and from there to Tunisia and the Sahara.

During these travels, he collected various materials, which were kept in the Dosson Villa in Casier, owned by de Reali himself and seen as an “African museum”. Today, it is seen as an important example of how archaeology, colonialism and identity construction were related between the late *XIX* century and the 1930s. The collection was not made for scientific or ethnographic purposes: it was used to create a permanent exhibition in the Dosson villa of African non-human animals and objects, which were made into furniture - like the two pythons on the bed’s sides used as lampshades. In addition to

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<sup>9</sup>The title of Count was conferred with the promulgation of the Royal Decree *motu proprio* of 16 December 1936 and RR. LL. PP. March 17, 1927, by King Vittorio Emanuele III.

the material collected, he surrounded himself with African animals, such as an African antelope, an ocelot and a chimpanzee, to remember the African continent. Even the chosen butler - Mohamed Hersi - was African, specifically Eritrean (Rallo, 1999). I would like to emphasise how the butler's tribe was described as "proud and beautiful", and the butler himself as "faithful" - "fido", a term commonly used also while referencing dogs. This could be compared to Akeley's description of "[their] Kivu savages", similar in sympathy and kindness to his childhood collie dog (Haraway, 1984-1985).

Upon de Reali's death, the collection was made of more than three hundred pieces. Since the proposal to have the villa of Dosson recognised as a national monument was rejected, the collection was given to the Municipality of Venice (Cadamuro, 2018). The delivery was postponed, among various reasons, for the possible move of the Natural History Museum from Fontego dei Turchi to Ca' Bernardo. Once the collection - with the addition of an oil portrait of the count later commissioned by Pigazzi de Reali - reached the museum, it was rearranged according to the scheme desired by de Reali. The inauguration of the rooms took place on July 20, 1939, a few months after Benito Mussolini signed the Pact of Steel with Adolf Hitler and therefore in a strong fascist thrust period. Some changes concerned the descriptive plates since they were in English and therefore prohibited by the fascist regime: other plates bearing the scientific or the Italian name were superimposed on them (Rallo, 1999).

In this collection, Amelia Pigazzi de Reali played an important role: while her husband left no written documents, she was the only one to give information on de Reali and his activity, works and collections through her correspondence to make the collection known. In particular, her impressions on the trip they made to Congo in 1925 were published as a book the following year. It is also thanks to her that it is known that de Reali had created some cinematographies on his travels, since they later have been lost (Cadamuro, 2018). Her works are going to be used in the third chapter, as a helpful resource for the analysis of some elements. Returning to Haraway's essay about the Teddy Bear Patriarchy for a moment, another similarity between de Reali's and Akeley's stories can be found. Akeley did not like to write too, so the accounts about his life and safaris come from his wives and Dorothy S. Greene. His first wife, Delia J. Akeley, was present at two safaris (in 1905 and 1909), among the most important for the taxidermist's career. She wrote *Jungle Portraits* (1930), in which she poses as a hunter and her husband was not always portrayed as a "hero". Mary J. Akeley, the second wife, instead wrote *The Wilderness Lives Again* (1940), a post-death biography of her husband where she is not involved in hunting and she commonly praised her husband: her goal was to carry on his work, so to encourage preservation and conservation. In this biography, his first wife is

## 2.3 General approaches of the museum

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never mentioned, although she had been a decisive figure. Greene was the hired secretary that wrote *In brightest Africa* (1923) for him, who however is not reported as author or co-author.

Finally, the Giancarlo Ligabue collection is divided into three sections - palaeontology, paleoanthropology and ethnology - given the heterogeneity of the finds. The materials have been collected or purchased by Ligabue in multiple areas worldwide over the years.

For this thesis, the collections involved are Miani's and de Reali's. It was nevertheless important to give a general synopsis of every collection for introducing in a deeper way the museum.

## 2.3 General approaches of the museum

In this thesis, in addition to analysing the objects and the exhibition itself, special attention is given to the ideologies of the museum staff. The relationship between the public and museums is influenced by the policies of the staff - especially the directors and curators - so their analysis can help to reveal both the attitude towards the public and the general line of the museums (Heumann Gurian, 1995). For this reason, interviews were conducted with the museum guide and educator, the taxidermist and the head of anthropology and ethnography (on November 29, 2022), and with the head of de Reali's rooms and the museum director (on January 11, 2023). For the decision of the staff, the first round of interviews was conducted altogether so that someone could add details or answer questions if someone else could not. The full transcript can be found in Appendix A. The overview of the initial interviews can be divided into three parts: a first part about the role and importance of taxidermy (especially in natural history museums), a second part about the choice of the set-up, and a third part about the relationship between the museum and the countries of origin of the objects.

Regarding the first part, the interviews revealed that they are all proponents of taxidermy, since it is a practice that allows not only the exhibition but also the preservation of non-human animals for possible studies. Moreover, the exhibition of non-human animals requires that they be, as the taxidermist said, "naturalised" to represent their true forms and characteristics. This view is consistent with the concept of taxidermy as a practice of representing "reality" articulated by Haraway (1984-1985) and explained in the previous chapter. The remains that are instead intended for research or teaching are dissected-generally into skin, bones, and organs-and then archived in a way that takes up as little space as possible. In this case, the intent is not to preserve the animal intact, but to dissect it so that the various parts can be studied. This view was also shared by the

head of the rooms of de Reali and the director, and in general it is common among people with a zoological or biological background, since part of the knowledge is traditionally acquired thanks to this type of anatomical preparations.

As for the second part, the itinerary has been designed to allow visitors to walk through the rooms and reflect on what they see, in line with what the head of the de Reali rooms and the museum director later said. In particular, the Miani and de Reali halls preserve the exhibition desired by the collectors (whose goal was to astonish visitors when they entered the rooms) to show the style of exhibition of the past. For them, there is a risk that the evolution of museology will be lost or ignored when each collection is reorganised in a modern framework. In describing the choices made by curators, they expressed in the first round that a curator must be more informed about the materials that make up an object than about the history of the object: In fact, knowledge of the materials is essential for better conservation of the objects-the curator's critical goal-while knowledge of their history is not fundamental to that goal. However, in a museum, the *curator* should not only care<sup>10</sup> about the objects, but also about the exhibition, as the person who organises and manages the exhibitions. Moreover, the museum staff explained that they do not dwell on descriptions, since these collections were not created for studies. It was therefore decided to describe the existing non-human animals on survey cards, which in the rooms of de Reali were divided according to the position on the walls, while in the room of Miani three or four objects were selected as examples, depending on the preferences of the staff.

From asking how the set-up of stuffed animals is perceived by visitors, four concepts emerged: 1) the importance of distinguishing between guided and unguided tours, 2) the importance of dividing the type of audience into children or adults, 3) the fact that people are attracted to the real animal “and not to something reconstructed in plastic”, in the words of the head of anthropology and ethnography, and 4) that the child should understand that hunting animals for fun should no longer be done - even if some rich people can in some cases.

The first point is connected to the mediation that a museum guide can provide, which was also highlighted in the interview with the head of the de Reali's rooms: however, the decision not to give a guided tour could be due to lack of time, availability of translations, or economic opportunities, and therefore it would be important to ensure that all visitors understand the meaning of the rooms regardless of the guide. With this in mind, it would be useful to investigate whether there are significant differences between the experiences of visitors who choose to take a guided tour and those who do not, so as not to disadvan-

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<sup>10</sup>The choice of the verb is based on the etymology of curator, the Latin word *cura*, “to take care of”.

### 2.3 General approaches of the museum

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tage those who do not want to or cannot take a guided tour and to ensure that the visit is an enriching experience for all.

The second concept is related to the fact that children and adults have different starting knowledge and languages. It is important to consider the nature of the audience in order to provide a better experience, and a very diverse audience - such as the museum's - makes it difficult to target. This point will be used to inform the changes to the exhibit proposed in chapter four, thanks to reflections from reading "Children in the Museum vs. Museums for Children" by H. Jones (2022).

The third point was highlighted by the museum guide and is connected to the sense of authenticity of the finds - reminiscent of Welsh's classifications already discussed in the last chapter. "Authentic" usually describes an object that was made by local people without alterations to its original state. However, the concept of authenticity is relative and usually follows Western ideologies: for example, some ethnologists can consider an altered object to be inauthentic even if it is fully part of a culture, especially when analysing objects from indigenous communities (Cilano & DeLoughrey, 2007; Turgeon & Dubuc, 2002). The study conducted by Schwan and Dutz (2020) explores the concept and perception of "authenticity" in three types of museums: science and technology, natural history, and cultural history. This research shows how replicas and alterations of "authentic" objects are accepted because the overall experience is paramount. The objects are still considered "authentic" by visitors even when they have been restored and some pieces have been replaced. In particular, visitors to natural history museums were the only ones who were aware of the importance of the objects to research and were the least likely to be transported to the time of the object, so that the meaning of the objects was also contextualised in this light and not based solely on their "authenticity". It also cites a small study by Bunce (2016, 2017) that showed that showing a taxidermied rabbit or its skeleton raised more questions in visitors than the same type of "non-authentic" objects. In summary, it is interesting to see that the presence of "authentic" objects does not produce significant changes in visitors, but the general idea is instead that it is fundamental. The concept of "authenticity" can be seen as a result of the development of Western modernity, that is, as a cultural construct influenced by two visions that reflect the nature/culture binarism: materialism and constructivism. The former views it as a dimension of "nature" with real, measurable, and unchanging characteristics. The second sees it as a product of the cultures through which it is created. Museums, already described as Western practises for sorting and classifying objects, guarantee the purity and "reality" of authentic objects (including "artefacts") through conservation and curation processes, while altered and heterogeneous objects do not enjoy this privilege. But the



concept of “authenticity” is also found in a post-Enlightenment context when it comes to people and society: “authenticity” and “purity” are thus also found in colonialism and nationalism (Jones, 2010). During the interviews, it was also underlined how the older people particularly remember the gorilla in the de Reali room because it was once positioned differently, at a lower height, and they were able to touch it: touching the gorilla creates a bond between visitors and the “stuffed animal”, and so they now remember it more than other parts of the visits they have taken. As seen in the previous chapter, the shift from touching to watching was a huge change in museology, and the fact that the staff mentioned this detail reinforces what was said before. The importance of touch is nothing new, and another relevant example of touching as a way to create contact is the handshake between a gorilla - an anthropomorphic non-human animal - and Jane Goodall - a white English female primatologist - in the Gulf Oil Corporation’s *Understanding is Everything* advertisement (1984, fig. 2.2), which is discussed in detail by Donna Haraway in her book *Primate Visions* (1989). The handshake shows communication, trust, responsibility, and understanding, creating a physical encounter between nature and society: natural science, feminine, is thus in opposition to the military-industrial-technoscientific complex, anthropocentric and masculine, reflected by Goodall’s and the gorilla’s sides. In this encounter, therefore, Jane Goodall is almost like a new Adam who, thanks to the “transformative touch” of the gorilla, can thus speak for nature and represent it, bringing peace between modern science and nature. However, in this narrative as well as inside the museums, the local racialised people are missing from the image and their voices suppressed in favour of the gorilla and the white English woman. In fact, both in the Gulf advertising and in the National Geographic reports, the people of Tanzania have neither voice nor bodies, perpetuating a narrative and a representation from and for the point of view of white Europeans. The hands, in particular, are metonymic figures that “gently embrace” each other in the absence of the so-called third world, the “other world”, the scenario of the drama (Haraway, 2019: 75).

Finally, the fourth point refers to the importance of the titles of the rooms. When asked about the importance of the titles of the rooms, they all explain the difference between collecting for astonishment and collecting for research: astonishment was a sign of power and prestige, while study means that the finds are needed for research. For this reason, finds have no value unless they have a scientific label indicating where and when the collection took place. Explaining this passage - or understanding it ourselves - is done by maintaining the original organisation envisioned by Miani and de Reali. For the museum, this is a way to raise awareness not only of the history of museology but also of species conservation and protection. Staff agreed that awareness of non-human

## 2.3 General approaches of the museum



**Figure 2.2:** *Understanding is Everything* by Gulf Oil Corporation (1984). In Haraway (2019), *Le promesse dei mostri*.

animals is greater today than in the past, especially among younger visitors: they may feel sorry for the dead animals displayed in the museum, and therefore wonder why they were killed and put on display. The staff also agreed that “sometimes they see or play much bloodier games”, as the guide highlighted, meaning that violence happens in other realities as well, so we shouldn’t be too stubborn about stuffed animals. I would add that a similar social and physical distance that takes place when eating meat and fish, recalling Carol J. Adams (1990). The fact that it has been pointed out that it is possible to hunt illegally if one is rich is interesting. The underlining of this ploy may suggest that preservation and conservation are perceived as a part of a classist and egalitarian discourse, according to which a rich person can continue to do morally wrong actions.

Ultimately, from the third part of the interview, it emerges that the museum personnel never contacted the populations from which the finds come. Given the topic of the thesis and the current debate around this (Grechi, 2021; ICOM, 2017), I asked the head of the ethnography and anthropology section if there has ever been a rapprochement between the museum and the various populations, to understand how the themes of restitution and exchange are perceived. The answer was that the objects are the result of exchange, collection or payment, so there was no need to contact the populations. After I pointed out that the narration of the exchange was not always true, the head commented that the problem does not arise anyway because Miani was before extreme colonialism and Ligabue went to places for research campaigns and therefore he had the permits to do what he did - de Reali however could be considered someone who stole from those populations. To my question “So, there never was a rapprochement?”, the answer of the head of anthropology and ethnography was “But what would the motivation be? Why

should we have had to get closer to the population from which the materials come?”. Then, she emphasised how it is necessary to separate the ethnographic finds from the naturalistic ones: while the former is influenced by the decolonial movement and by the restitution, the latter is not, in her perspective. Furthermore, since the museum does not possess ethnographic materials - apart from those of Miani - it does not need to enter so much into this debate. Finally, she highlighted how no one in the museum has an anthropological or “humanistic” background, and therefore they look at “materials with totally different (sense of) objectivity”, as indicated by themselves. From these statements, it is thus possible to note some characteristics that can be traced back to the division between “Culture” and “Science”: a clear-cut distinction entails the fact that ethnographic and naturalistic finds are considered, and consequently treated, differently (the former are suitable for restitution, while the latter are not), and thus that the museum does not consider it important to promote a deeper analysis of the finds’ provenance since it deals mainly with naturalistic material. Moreover, they state that the museum has the collections because they *were* donated, not because *it* collected them: even though they pointed out how they avoid the glorification of the white explorer who “discovered” “savage” countries and “civilise” them, the very idea of donation implies that the property of the objects belonged to the explorer, and therefore there is no consideration of the power dynamics involved. In this way, there is the perpetuation of the narrative which sees objects as “gifts”, “pays” or “swaps” items - from populations to the explorers and from them to the museum.

In detail, the museum director’s approach generally shows a willingness to dialogue and cooperate, and the need or desire to necessarily have the “authentic” objects of the collections is not noticed. A theme that he takes up to motivate these choices is that the museum serves the citizens, it has a relevant didactic function, and it can therefore be understood that for him, just as the museum of Venice is to narrate the history of the Venetians, that of other cities is to narrate other stories. However, in the case of collections such as those of Miani’s and de Reali’s, the finds speak of a history of Venetian explorers, from finds stolen from African populations. A review of why and how collections were created, more than by whom and when is central in post- and decolonial approaches (Amselle, 2017; Armstrong, 2002; Grechi, 2021). When the director states “In this case, however, it would not be the restitution but the dismemberment of the collection, and already in this way, there is a risk that a collection that already has its own meaning as a whole will be scattered”, one should bear in mind that that collection has a meaning here, in Italy and in Venice, which is not the same as it would have in museums in other places: as previously mentioned, objects have various meanings and biographies based

### 2.3 General approaches of the museum

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on their context (of creation, use or display), and thus reflecting on how necessary the meaning is here is important (Kopytoff, 1986). Who chooses and how they choose which meaning is more important is also linked to the idea of property, law, and representation. Otherwise, the risk is that of perpetuating a sort of invisibility of the power - and of the cultures, knowledge, traditions, and so on - of the populations that have been deprived of such materials in passing, and continue to give “precedence” to the nations that they have taken in the past. Finally, here too there is no active action in contacting the populations, justified by lack of time and funds, but “fortunately the museum has no problems [with the request for restitution]”, says the director. Here, a reflection arises: in 2023, should it be the population of origin who contacts museums around the world and ask for a refund, or should it be the museums that make themselves available to do so? This reflection is based on two opposing approaches but offers the starting point for analysing the basic idea of the role of the museum and for whom the museum is.

These interviews, after the overview of the history of the museum and the collections, were important for this thesis in order to better understand the history, organisation, views and approaches of the museum.

# Chapter 3

## Analysis of the trophy rooms

### 3.1 The analysis

As outlined in the first chapter, museums are called upon to address contemporary issues such as the perpetuation of colonial narratives, gender-related issues and anthropocentrism. Since objects cannot speak for themselves (Miles & Tout, 2000), analysing how museums display these objects is a necessary step in understanding existing patterns and improving museum communication, whether implicit or explicit.

In addition to the communication made by the museum, it is also important to analyse the communication between museum operators and visitors. This kind of dynamic is a two-way communication since they usually have visits where they both talk and share their thoughts. However, more traditional exhibitions often still see this relation as a one-way channel, from the museum to visitors, thus giving more importance to the museum's point of view than to the visitor experiences. This approach implies two assumptions: being sure about how viewers will receive the exhibition and that they will fully understand the meanings of operators. Perin (1995) sees these uncertainties as resolvable when museum representations and receptions are viewed as cultural processes. The author divides reception processes into the reception of *substantial elements* (cultural resources) and of *formal elements* (cultural forms). The first case includes the *what*, so the systems of meanings, ideals, myths, beliefs, and fundamental concepts that visitors use to interpret, explore and face experiences. The second case includes the structures that enable learning about new concepts and having new experiences, so the *how* that can be divided into, for example, narrative structures or timelines, maps, the layering of information, and linguistic systems (metaphor, paradox, irony). By proposing to focus on cultural processes, the author suggests that it would be easier to understand visitors' interests and to capture their attention with appropriate proposals, such as surveys or interviews: in this way,

### 3.1 The analysis

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visitors would feel more connected to the topic and, consequently, would be influenced by the exhibition as it takes their opinions into account. Another useful indicator that according to Perin can be used to better understand the visitors' perceptions is the duration of the visit. The Smithsonian, for example, divides the public into four types: the *streakers*, who travel the exhibits very quickly, the *whiskers* ("sneaks"), who do not follow a precise order, the *strollers*, who take longer to visit, and finally the *readers*, who spend much time for their visit as they are those who dwell more on texts and information. The exhibition is based on capturing the attention of visitors - trying to change *streakers* into *strollers*, and *strollers* into *readers* -, and giving enough information to *streakers* and *whiskers* despite their short visit. To do so, operators should also try to reproduce the structure of more familiar *media* in the exhibitions: for instance, the "opening credits" (or "ten-second points") are catchy to get the attention of the visitors and encourage them to move on to the next "level" ("sixty-second points"), richer in details for giving a deeper knowledge of the subject. Moreover, visitor studies (Perin, 1995; Schwan & Dutz, 2020) have underlined the importance of providing cross-disciplinary skills, such as abstracted reasoning, creativity, observation and connection-making, rather than mere information to read and look at. Besides in the UK and Germany, the multi-disciplinary framework for achieving this in museums is not yet influential worldwide. To improve this situation, one should think about what the tools and indicators of a good visit are, and study the visitor experience without placing it in the background compared to conservation, research, preparation and teaching. To do this, a good starting point is the Guidelines for the Organization of Educational Services in Science Museums by the National Association of Science Museums (Casini, 2016). Among these, relevant for this thesis are *Resources* and *Continuity* and *Impact*. *Resources* and *Continuity* means having part of the museum staff responsible for monitoring and having continuity in data collection (which no longer occurs within the Venetian museum). *Impact* requires taking evaluation results into account and making adjustments based on them (in some cases done by the museum).

Star and Griesemer conducted another interesting study of natural history museums (1989). The museum studied was the Berkeley Museum of Vertebrate Zoology in California. In this study, the authors emphasise how heterogeneous scientific work is, based on the cooperation of different stakeholders, each with different backgrounds, who try to "translate" their own aims and points of view on others - with the risk that this also leads to tensions. The research, which aims to propose a new analytical approach rather than a solution to the problem, starts from several starting points in order to better understand the relationships that created and supported the museum. In this, it differs from the *interessement* model pursued by other scholars such as Latour (2005), as it proposes

a broader and less reductionist gaze (Star & Griesemer, 1989). Thus, for a museum to succeed effectively, new findings must be created, viewed as new objects and methods<sup>1</sup> that provide a common meeting point for all the actors. This view served to give context to the museum and collections to better understand their role rather than an analysis of how the museum functions.

As a methodological source for this paper, I drew on the book *Visual Methodologies* by Gillian Rose (2007). In her book, Rose explains that discourse can be seen as the knowledge that defines and prescribes how the world is perceived and functions. It can take different forms, the nature and contexts of which must be considered in the process. In this way, both visual and written forms can be considered discourse. As an example of how truth regimes operate on a visual level, Rose also refers to Haraway's essay *Teddy Bear Patriarchy*, and was particularly attuned to the general topic of this thesis. She also draws on Michel Foucault's concepts of *discourse* and its relationship to power. In his view, discourses have power because they are productive and performative and do not simply reflect reality. In this case, the term discourse refers to images, practises, and texts, both visual and verbal, and this is how Rose understands the object of discourse analysis. Some discourses may be more powerful than others for two reasons: They are sustained by more powerful social actors (e.g., police and museums) and/or they claim to tell the only truth (Foucault's *regime of truth*, as in some photographs). Discussing the methodology of discourse analysis alongside other approaches, Rose not only analyses the generality of discourses, but also highlights issues related to power, truth regimes, institutions, and technologies associated with various institutional practises, focusing on the latter as discursive spaces in which truth regimes are established and maintained. Institutions are viewed in Foucauldian terms as forms that create the relationship between power and knowledge (also referred to as *institutional apparatuses*) and utilise them through various techniques (*institutional technologies*). An example of these techniques is photography, which, as will be explained in more detail in the next paragraph, served to show "reality". In the 19th century, natural history museums collected and displayed items that depicted colonised people as less cultured and more "natural" than Western people, sometimes in rooms that were located directly after the stuffed animals. In these cases, spatial organisation represents a certain reality and maintains a dominant moral value.

Finally, I have been inspired by Greenblatt's idea of the distinction between the

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<sup>1</sup>In the research carried by Star and Griesemer (1989), new objects are referred as "boundary objects": representations of nature, abstract or concrete, created by the collaboration of different people; these can have different meanings for each of them, but they manage to act as a point of contact between the different ideologies. On the other side, new methods are called "methods standardisation": procedures, ideas and techniques shared and applied among the various actors, allowing uniformity without however taking away freedom from individuals.

## 3.2 Elements present in the rooms

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elements collected in a museum and their exhibition (Greenblatt, 1995). In his view, this idea implies that the content should not dictate the way in which the museum exhibits it, but that this should be done on the basis of the approach the museum takes toward what is to be exhibited. This is reminiscent of the idea of *contemporaneity* explained in Chapter 1: the same elements can be displayed differently based on different ideologies, and the same ideology shapes the way different elements are displayed. This implies that the risk of misunderstanding is lower when the objects or artefacts on display were originally conceived for exhibition, and greater when the original intent and that of the exhibitor are more distant, as the initial and final roles diverge (Baxandall, 1995).

These points of view are therefore used for the analysis of the spaces, since they allow us to approach them with a broad, critical and methodical view. Even if the form of the museum itself is already up for debate (as in Chapter 1), the analysis of the spaces of a particular museum may allow to highlight gaps or strengths and thus contribute to the improvement of the narrative. The three rooms I have considered - one of Miani and two of de Reali - are those in which the collections are used to show a historical account of the evolution of museology, from “collecting to wonder” to “collecting for research”, following the path set by the museum. The first part of the analysis will deal with the existing elements, the second part will focus more on the physical space of the rooms, their organisation and furnishing, and the third part will deal with the language used in them. In both rooms, as emerged during the interviews, the current exhibitions are strongly influenced by constraints established by the acquisition of the collections - by de Reali’s family and the Società Italiana Geografica. The analysis of all these elements makes it possible to understand on several fronts what types of *objects* are shown and which narratives they may entail, helping to better understand how the *educational spectacle*, in Rose’s words, is staged by the museum for the eyes of the visitors.

## 3.2 Elements present in the rooms

The elements can be displayed in different ways. They can be inside display cases (usually behind glass), in open displays, in reconstructions of life-like scenes (such as dioramas), or in simulacra (made by a museum to fill a gap in the collection). Each of these display styles has a different effect on visitors. If an item is in a display case and thus has no relation to its original use or location, it is used to reflect the classification given by the museum (Rose, 2007).

The time in which the collections were created changed slightly: Miani worked in the 19th century, while de Reali organised his “African museum” between the 19th and 20th



centuries, and an important value was given to the collection during the Fascist regime<sup>2</sup>, in which the growth of Italian nationalism and colonial views had a greater impact on the ideas of Africa and African people and non-human animals. As for the type of objects, the Miani and de Reali collections contain different types of elements.

As the museum staff noted several times during the interview, one of the problems concerning the objects in the Miani collection is that there is no complete and detailed inventory of these objects, but rather various notes written by different scholars in a very subjective manner. To make matters worse, Miani was not very precise in his diaries, which makes it difficult to put these objects in context and thus better understand their meaning. An improvement has occurred thanks to the research carried out on the 150th anniversary of the explorer's death, but there are still many doubts that require funds and personnel to solve. In general, it can be said that the collected objects and mummies reflect Miani's ideas and goals: to bring back various objects, more for exhibition purposes than for study, to admire them and to obtain further funds to return to Africa. Miani's collection includes objects that can be divided into objects that belonged to him and objects and mummies that he collected. Among the objects that belonged to Miani are maps he made (both on the panels and on the floor), representations of his drawings (like the instruments on the wall) and his diary<sup>3</sup>. Other elements, such as documents, flags, etc., have been added to explain the figure of the explorer and place him in a historical context. They are not in the showcases with the collected objects, but on the panels, where there are also explanations of him and the collection.

The objects collected were more or less of everyday use or sacred significance, from commonplace spears and necklaces to objects for rituals, as well as three mummies, two of crocodiles and one of a woman. These objects are enclosed in cabinets renewed with the 2010-2011 changes according to Miani's scheme (fig. 3.1), and are therefore divided according to ethnic groups or the place of collection. They are not explained by targets or labels. In particular, the mummies were considered powerful spiritual objects, and in the 15th century European interest in mummies grew (due to the great demand for medical *mumiya*, which can be found in the remains). This interest continued to develop, and by the 18th century scholars were more interested in the mummies themselves than in the products they contained. However, with the Napoleonic wars and English colonialism, interest in ancient Egypt reached a new peak, so much so that in the 19th century the interest in mummies increased. In addition, the Italian explorer Giovanni Battista Belzoni (1778 - 1823) discovered the tomb of Seti I in 1817, which was of great importance for the

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<sup>2</sup>De Reali joined the National Fascist Party in 1925 before it became compulsory for public servants. Record to De Reali (1909) in AMC, b. 264, III category. Urban and rural police, contravention notices.

<sup>3</sup>At the time of this thesis his diary is exhibited for the 150th anniversary of the explorer's death.

### 3.2 Elements present in the rooms

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development of mummy research (Parra, 2019). Thus, it can be said that the presence of three mummies in the Miani collection was in line with the style of the time, and thus they were important for the fame of the collection itself.

In general, it can be said that the intention to tell the story of the explorer can be perceived in the room, given the disproportion between the information given about Miani and the objects present (almost non-existent). This disproportion is also found in the exhibition space, which follows both the style desired by the explorer and the time in which the elements were recorded: while the African finds are in the cabinets to be viewed "from a distance", through the glass barrier, the information about Miani is closer, available and not protected by glass. The glass, the cage of *captivity* in which the artefacts are trapped, prevents this dynamic and becomes the *ideological framing* that allows them to be surpassed only by seeing them (Han-ying, 2012; Classen & Howes, 2006; Haraway 1984-85). As explained in the interviews, the staff in this room chose three or four objects to represent everything, perpetuating the European tendency to explain entire cultures by summarising the elements on display. In my opinion, the will to give almost all the explanations besides those of Miani is not due to a lack of space (as will be seen in the next paragraph) nor to a lack of information, since some data, even if not numerous, are known.

In the de Reali collection, on the other hand, there are mainly two types of elements: photographs of his travels in Africa (on the wall, at eye level) and remains of non-human animals (partially or fully prepared and sometimes used as parts of the furniture, on the wall and on the floor). In the rooms there is also a panel with some explanations and a copy of Pigazzi de Reali's diary, which will be discussed in the fourth section of this chapter. As mentioned in the previous chapter, de Reali himself did not leave any direct information about his travels. However, some features can be guessed indirectly: for example, when the collection was given to the museum, it included a copy of Rowland Ward's book *Records of Big Game* (1910 edition). The book was dedicated to all *sportsmen of the world* and contained information on how to find rare non-human animals to include in collections and how to properly prepare *trophies*, suggesting that de Reali shared these views and practices. An interesting "discursive" source for the explorer's approach is the collection of photographs he took on his travels: they imply a different medium than the other elements seen previously and can therefore help contextualize the explorer. Photographs were useful in perpetuating colonial stereotypes and narratives, not only as documentary sources to be passed on, but also as tools to produce them.

As Azoulay (2021) writes, photography is not only a practice, but rather a relationship that reinforces and reproduces systematic racism. Mass communication in the colonial



(a) Original lithography by Miani (1865). Museum of Natural History of Venice, archive (in Bon et al., 2016).



(b) First exhibition of the Miani collection at the G. L. Natural History Museum of Venice (1880). Photo taken by Matilde Spagnolo.



(c) Current exhibition of the collection at the Venetian museum. Photo by Matilde Spagnolo.

**Figure 3.1:** The exhibition of the Miani collection, from the explorer's scratch to the present organisation.

### 3.2 Elements present in the rooms

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(a) Alive *Taurotragus oryx*



(b) Dead *Taurotragus oryx*

**Figure 3.2:** an alive (3.2a) and a dead (3.2b) *Taurotragus oryx* or eland antelope. Natural History Museum of Venice. From Cadamuro (2018).

era made extensive use of visual and printed support - especially after the introduction of Kodak No. 1 in 1888. A photograph was seen as an objective source of information, when in fact it conceals the photographer's point of view: it is a kind of predatory act in relation to the subject, who is "objectified, "dehumanised and recorded on the support as a symbol, as an icon"; the African continent is often iconised accordingly (Cadamuro, 2018). Returning to Haraway's essay, Akeley, the explorer and taxidermist, also thought that "hunting with a camera takes twice as many people as hunting with a rifle" (Haraway, 1984-185: 39), and he too saw the environment as a setting for hunting with a camera and eventually developed a camera to better capture his expeditions. Especially in Italy, middle-class Italians subscribed to magazines with detailed accounts of the African continent and its wonders, in which photography was used to depict the erotic. Along with the films of the time, this shaped the country's imperial memory (Andall & Duncan, 2005).

Cadamuro, in her master's thesis (2018), compared the photographs of de Reali and Nello Puccioni (1881-1937), both Italian explorers working at the turn of the 19th and 20th centuries. For my thesis, I would not consider Puccioni's analysis, except for one example that is useful at the end of this paragraph. De Reali took the photographs as a kind of proof to the public, so that people could see the courage with which the Count embarked on the trips to Africa. In fact, he often appeared in the vicinity of the hunted animals. But he also photographed the species in their natural habitat so that the shapes and proportions could be better seen after their death: As mentioned earlier, de Reali owned Ward's book, in which photography is considered a fundamental tool for any hunter because it allows one to record what the non-human animal looked like before it was killed, thus creating better taxidermy (fig. 3.2). In this type of photograph, the camera can be seen as a precursor to the rifle: It is positioned close to the face, it is aimed, and the shot is fired (*snapshot* and *shot*). De Reali did not caption the images,



**Figure 3.3:** Amelia Pigazzi de Reali (on the left) and Giuseppe de Reali (on the right) with the dead body of *Hippotragus equinus* or roan antelope. Natural History Museum of Venice. From Cadamuro (2018).

suggesting that the photographs themselves were intended as captions for the trophies.

In the photos, de Reali appears relaxed compared to the non-human animals and the African people, as a way to express dominance and power over them in those situations. Remarkably, he is photographed only once with the killed animal in its integrity (fig. 3.3): in all other cases, he is close to the skins or other parts of the body of the non-human animals. However, in this photo, the “strong” hunter seems to be Pigazzi de Reali and not him, both for the body position, the rifle in her hand and the fact that she has more light, while he is bending over the roan antelope’s face.

De Reali also photographed landscapes. Understood as a Western European representation of the physical space of control and domination, and not just as a purely physical space, the aesthetic point of view of the photographer is also present here. The staging of the environment in front of him allows him to alienate himself from the context in which he is, becoming an external observer and thus no longer part of the scene or the environment. Before colonialism, this type of photography was not practised in Africa. However, colonial pressures reinforced the idea that Europe was higher and better than Africa, resulting in an imbalance of power between the photographer and the subject, leading to this kind of “distanced” photography. In these almost picturesque photographs, Africa is portrayed as an untouched land, with vast stretches of land and only some form of “civilisation” - although de Reali encountered diverse populations during his travels, as he travelled to many African regions (Rallo, 1999). In these photographs, de Reali reintroduces the idea

### 3.2 Elements present in the rooms

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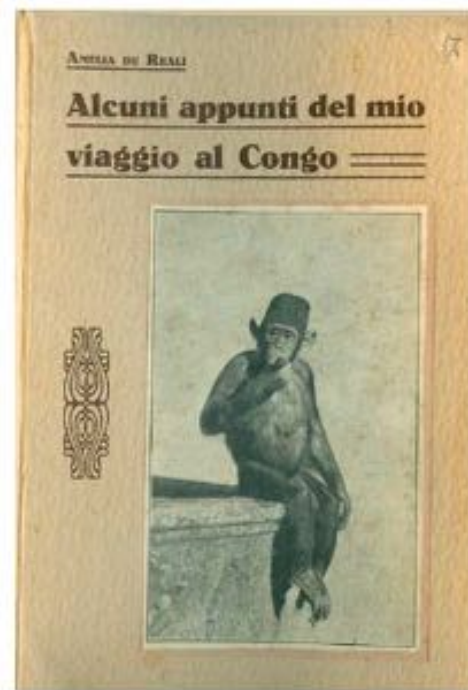


**Figure 3.4:** Indigenous women and armed men. Natural History Museum of Venice. From Cadamuro (2018).

of Africa as a continent where humans can reconnect with nature. In summary, de Reali is present in the photographs not only with his body, but also through the design of the landscape and the choice of details to show: spears and bows, for example, were a typical representation of populations as primitive and violent in colonial photography (fig. 3.4).

Furthermore, women are depicted nude or semi-nude by de Reali, perpetuating the stereotype - and myth - of easy sexual conquest: the female body becomes to white men what territories are to nations, the object of desire to possess them. This is consistent with various representations from the period in which sexuality is a feature of black female subjectivity, reinforced by non-human animal metaphors that convey carnality and continue to distinguish Italian civilisation from African primitiveness (Pickering-Iazzi, 2003). In places such as Somalia, Libya and Eritrea - where de Reali travelled during his expeditions - the inhabitants were mostly Muslim and therefore did not practise nudity as it was often portrayed by Europeans. In Puccioni's ethnographic photographs, the female figures are generally dressed, especially if they belong to a "high caste," and the only photographs of nude or semi-nude women are in the anthropometric files. This is an example that supports the thesis that the condition of nudity was imposed by the photographer rather than the culture of the population (Cadamuro, 2018).

As for the 150 or so taxidermied animals, previous chapters have already outlined the importance that taxidermy, and generally the exhibition of non-human animals, can have for decolonial analysis. In this part, it is therefore important to recall that some of them are hanging on the walls, while others are lying on the floor. The only indications are the Latin and common names and the position in the room. Their arrangement is not always precise: in some cases the symmetrical scheme of de Reali has been recreated, in others they are simply placed side by side. In many cases they are illuminated with light from below, which enhances their presence and effect. They generally go all the way to the ceiling in the smaller room, while in the larger one they are placed until the banner that recalls the African savannah landscapes - as if to give some of that "context" which



**Figure 3.5:** Front page of Pigazzi de Reali's diary "Alcuni appunti del mio viaggio al Congo". Treviso, 1925. From Cadamuro (2018).

otherwise is entrusted only to the photos.

The fact that Pigazzi de Reali's diary can be consulted makes it an important element, especially since its cover is visible (fig. 3.5). Its cover can be used for an important reflection, even if not directly related to the explorer.

The cover, which represents a monkey that is smoking a pipe while wearing headgear, could be interpreted as a racist comparison of a Congolese person. Images of this type, where a black person was associated with a primate and tobacco, were not a rarity at the time. Tobacco companies, like cotton and sugar ones, were deeply connected to slavery as it allowed them to make large profits and, in the 18th and 19th centuries, ads generally showed this relation with images of a black labourer and a white consumer (Ramamurthy, 2003). Also represented as lazy, ignorant, strong, and violent, black people had suffered from lots of racial stereotyping. Moreover, historically the word *nigger* was used to indicate - and to address antipathy to - black people, creating in this way also a slang connecting black people and smoke, such as the word *niggerlipping*: "wetting the end of a cigarette while smoking it" (Pilgrim, 2012). These types of stereotypes can still be found today: in 2013, the advertisement by KT&G (South Korea's largest tobacco company) was accused of racism since it showed monkeys dressed as reporters declaring "Africa is coming!" (BBC, 2013). A relevant change occurred after the Second World War: if before the target of the advertisements were white people (with racist representations of black

### 3.3 Spatial organisation

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people used to wink at that slice of the population), later they became black people, mainly to sell them menthol cigarettes (Chamberlain, Karreman & Laurence, 2021). The increased use of cigarettes further worsened the gap between black and white people, and still today Black Americans have worse overall health than White Americans - lower life expectancy, more disease and higher death rates (Bauer, 2016). The pipe, in particular, appeared to offer the imperial figure an image of authority, thus becoming a symbol of imperial culture and control (Ramamurthy, 2003). The fact that it is used on the cover of Pigazzi de Reali's book is therefore not a coincidence since, given that it is paired with a monkey, it follows the stereotyping of the time. Finally, it's not very clear what kind of hat the monkey is wearing. It could be a Kufi, a typical hat of North, East and West Africa, and South Asia, often related to the African diaspora. It is sometimes worn by men to symbolise having religious power, being a householder or being an elder who has the community's respect. It could also be a Congolese Royal Hat (Mpu), used by people with important roles in society and may be represented as worn by a monkey to denigrate them. In the 18th and up to the mid-19th century there were portrayals of black people as princes, placed in a lower relation than white people as princes (Ramamurthy, 2003). It could be thus said that if the hat is related to this interpretation, the cover gains more relevance through post- and decolonial lenses. The museum staff has never focused on this image for reflection or research.

In summary, Miani and de Reali collected different types of ethnographic elements, but both worked according to the ideologies of their time. As the elements they collected were exhibited according to their ideas, the resulting discourses, in Rose's view, perpetuated the power dynamics between white Europeans and black Africans of the time and kept racist representations alive.

### 3.3 Spatial organisation

To be effective, exhibitions must encourage visitor interaction and engagement so that they move from a passive leisure activity to an active learning process. To accomplish this, research and evaluation can help understand visitors' experiences in exhibitions (Allen, 2004). In recent decades, and especially since 2000, new technologies have been used in museums as aids to interpretation (such as audio guides) and as part of the exhibitions themselves (such as immersive representations). On the one hand, this has allowed museums to experiment with new tools and possibilities; on the other hand, it has required an analysis of museum spaces and exhibitions (Tzortzi & Schieck, 2017). To better understand the space in a museum, it can be helpful to compare it to the relationship between



museums and time. The main characteristic of time in a museum is its fleeting nature, which creates a sort of bubble in visitors' lives, as time is stopped in the museum. In contrast, the museum relies mainly on physical participation, creating different types of experiences. The geographical and architectural elements of the museum that go hand in hand with the "time bubble" create a complex method of communication (Silverstone, 2000). Thus, the risk is to create a narrative that does not properly use space and is incongruent or in tension with the absence of time perceived by visitors. Moreover, the space in a museum is designed according to different criteria: visitor safety, preservation of collections, accessible routes for people with different mobility, lighting, video surveillance, but also the availability of spaces and areas for exhibition, creation of atmospheres, perspectives or visual comparisons (Wineman & Peponis, 2010). In particular, architecture influences buildings both in their general functions - such as movement and shared presence of elements - and in their specific functions - in the case of museums, to show. In this way, museums can influence the visitor experience by determining the spatial relationships between spaces, objects, and visitors. The impact of a space depends not only on its metric or geometric properties (such as size and shape), but also on its configurational properties, which depend on the overall position of the space within the overall space - in this case, the space of the museum. The former properties are more directly measurable or understandable, while the latter are more abstract, as they are not always measurable except through a study of the movements or perceptions of people entering the rooms. However, configuration properties are essential because they affect visitors' overall experience of an exhibition (Tzortzi, 2016). Space is also needed for orientation in the general exhibition based on the path organised by museums to illustrate the collection on display (Wineman, Peponis & Dalton, 2006). Spatial movement is indeed an informal mode of education, and the way visitors are encouraged to move through an exhibition, whether along a clearly defined path or more freely by making their own way, will structure the overall impression of the exhibition. The overall movements in an exhibition can be divided into three main categories: *spatially dictated movement* (highly constrained by the museum), *spatially random movement* (entirely free), and *spatially guided movement* (more structured but still allowing personal choices). If a museum wants to encourage a certain direction, it should make evident some patterns or themes to visitors. On the contrary, if themes are not very evident, visitors will probably search for patterns by themselves (Wineman & Peponis, 2010). In particular, Tzortzi (2016) divides the spatial variables of a museum into independent and dependent ones: the former relate to the building and the objects, the latter to the visitors' experience. The first independent variable is related to the spatial structure of the building and states that "the more spaces

### 3.3 Spatial organisation

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are arranged in sequences, the less variety there is in the way they can be traversed”, meaning that personal freedom is conditioned by the organisation of the museum. The second independent variable is related to the spatial arrangement of objects and states that “the more there is conceptual intervention by the curator, in terms of pre-given narrative, the more the aim is to reflect a specific meaning”, which results in emphasising the inherent narratives of the museum. The variables dependent on visitor experiences are also divided into two types. The first considers the informational dimension of the visitor experience, explaining that “the architect or curator controls the information and reduces the exploratory aspect of the visit both intellectually and spatially” (Tzortzi, 2016: 113), emphasising the conceptual weight of the choices made by the source. The second examines the social dimension of the visitor experience, where “the layout controls the movement of visitors in a prescribed manner and structures a constrained pattern of encounters” (Tzortzi, 2016: 113), emphasising the possibilities for interaction between visitors.

In the case examined, the Venetian museum has dedicated one room to the Miani’s collection and two rooms to that of de Reali, which total area is however slightly smaller than that of Miani. In general, the rooms have elements along or attached to the walls (the only exception is the box containing the mummies in the Miani room). This allows visitors to move more freely, without too many limitations, so according to a *spatially guided movement* (Wineman & Peponis, 2010). This also allows for the accommodation of large groups (e.g., during tours) and the containment of the danger of visitors blocking each other’s view. In addition, the independent spatial variables mentioned by Tzortzi (2016) were relevant to the spatial organisation of the space, as museum staff explained several times during the interviews: the management of space thus influenced the display of objects and the presence of explanations and information. However, as mentioned earlier, the elements in the two rooms are different, so the interaction with the space varies. As Rose (2007) points out, different types of exhibitions lead to different results. The Miani room, despite having many objects on display, is tidy and orderly thanks to the use of cabinets, which avoids the clutter of information about the collection. In de Reali’s rooms, on the other hand, there are no cabinets, but open displays with photographs and taxidermied animals, so the information about the collection is no longer orderly. Even though there is a basic order to the exhibition, Miani’s is perceived as more orderly than de Reali’s, but this is in keeping with the purpose of the collections: Miani wanted to exhibit and raise money, while de Reali wanted to delve into his finds and not keep them “locked away”, orderly and immobile. In addition, the Miani room is perceived as large and bright because of its large area and the combination of lighting and light colours on

the walls and ceiling (fig. 3.1c). The de Reali rooms, on the other hand, appear smaller and darker due to the arrangement of the elements, the subdued lighting, and the colour of the walls and ceilings. In particular, the walls in the de Reali rooms are painted red. As staff explained in the interview, these rooms have red walls to convey the message that there was human domination (e.g., hunting) in the past that led to extinction and environmental degradation. The red is thus an alarm signal intended to convey a sense of danger.



**Figure 3.6:** The “African museum” in the Dosson villa. Photographs by Giovanni Scarabello. From Cadamuro (2018).



**Figure 3.7:** de Reali's bigger room.

In this way, the emotional impact that people have in these rooms is used to convey an educational and positive message about awareness of species extinction and hunting. However, almost the same red was also applied to the back of the cabinets in the Miani Room and on the *Wunderkammern* walls, but without the same meaning - which could be confusing for people. In particular, the smallest room of the de Reali part is designed

### 3.4 Terminology used

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like a living room to show that they are utilitarian, African fauna than furniture: It was important to create a living room atmosphere, so a chandelier and curtains were added - as explained in the interviews. De Reali also had scattered the objects in different rooms of Dosson's villa, so the overall impression was much more immersive than that of the museum: the impression of the immersive house museum could therefore be considered lost (fig. 3.6 and 3.7). The chandelier, even though it is large, is located in a small room that is cluttered with objects so that it almost disappears.

In summary, all the three rooms have large central open spaces and elements on the periphery of the rooms that allow large groups to enter, but also have an arrangement that could have provided space for more information.

## 3.4 Terminology used

Various textual technologies that museums may use include captions and captions (perhaps highlighting some aspects of the objects), panels (large text panels with some sort of wider context for the objects), and catalogues (usually for sale and produced by the museum) (Rose, 2007). The Venetian Museum mainly uses panels in the spaces considered. In general, the way visitors read is difficult to observe because they can read the texts even if they are not standing directly in front of the signs or do not stare at them for many seconds<sup>4</sup>. Also, in groups, one person may read for everyone or read during the visit and then explain to the others. Finally, text is not always read in its entirety for two main reasons: 1) people are concerned about enjoying the relationships with the other members of the group, 2) visitors "scan and sample" only part of the labels, even if they are well and fluently written (McManus, 1990).

It is necessary to give weight to terminology because stereotypes have the power to create and reinforce a mentality or an idea. In relation to Africa, and especially in the past, visual representation has been paired with terminology reminiscent of racist and colonial ideals. Some recurring terms that can be associated with a stereotypical description of Africa are *dark*, *wild*, *black*, *ferocious*, *treacherous*, *attractive*, *charming*, and *mysterious*. Black, in particular, is a typical adjective used, and the descriptions can be infantilising towards the African populations - while the Western population is portrayed as adult and industrious (Said, 1991). This representation, coupled with the low level of interest in African cultures, has led to contempt and pity for these cultures: they can only improve thanks to "whites" who can elevate them from their inferiority

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<sup>4</sup>A tool that can be used is the eye-tracking, as Casini expresses in *Qualità e linguaggio: come facilitare l'acquisizione di competenze nei musei scientifico-naturalistici* (2016).

(Surdich, 1982). In particular, non-human animal metaphors are used toward black people as a form of dehumanising language: the spectre of whiteness is used to classify people's superiority, intelligence, and exceptionalism, thus linking speciesism and racism (Plec, 2015). The words used by museums in their practices can highlight the convergence between a hegemonic institution (the museum) and a minority group (the communities from which the objects come). The dialect used is therefore helpful in analysing the deeper messages being conveyed. For example, communities are usually seen and named as *things* - such as "the Irish," "the blacks" and "the WASP"<sup>5</sup> - leading to a homogeneous and stereotypical view of these groups (Karp, 1995). Object markers are relevant for three reasons. First, they have an explanatory rather than a descriptive role or function for the objects. Second, they are elements in which the visitor plays an active role: He observes, reads, and examines the information given. Third, they are *intellectual space* where visitors, curators, and "producers" of the object come into contact (Baxandall, 1995). Therefore, they will be analysed in the following part to see how the Venetian Museum uses them. The museum has chosen not to add too much text because it believes that this distracts and demoralises the visitor: Schwan and Dutz conducted a research in 2020 in which they stressed that additional information does not distract the audience, but that stories, models, illustrations and explanations provide a helpful context for objects, especially for "authentic objects", as in the case of the Venetian Museum.

As mentioned in chapter 2, in addition to the writings written by the museum, the rooms also contain those of Giuseppe Miani and Amelia Pigazzi de Reali. As for the Miani room, the descriptions show a "tenacious and courageous" explorer with an "authentic passion" for music, who "faithfully recorded" his travels with "extraordinary consistency". The diary contains not only descriptions of adventures, but also "the vicissitudes and bitterness he experienced" and gives information with "immediacy" about the people he encountered, making it a "formidable" source. Although the museum says it avoids glorifying the "white explorer going into wild Africa", it seems that this idea of a hero and a brave person is nevertheless expressed in the descriptions through laudatory terminology. Moreover, there is a dissonance between the museum evidence, which states that Miani is confusing and inaccurate, and the information in the captions: in the plates, the only "unreliable" people are in fact the people he hired for his first expedition, thus proving to be "an obstacle to the success of the project". All this is in addition to the glorification of the fast way in which he describes the populations, without saying that this is not always a positive procedure. In de Reali's rooms, his biography is titled "Biography of a *hunter*"<sup>6</sup>, accompanied by a photograph that shows the Count not with an animal (as

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<sup>5</sup>White Anglo-Saxon Protestant.

<sup>6</sup>Miani, on the other hand, was described as an *explorer*.

### 3.4 Terminology used

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one might assume, given his numerous trophies and extensive safari photo repertoire), but on horseback with a rifle and a black man at his side, which is interesting in that the (fundamental) role of Africans in big-game hunting is not mentioned in any of the rooms. The choice of this photograph leads to the question: how does the photograph give meaning to the text and vice versa? If the viewer reads the title and looks at the image, what will they conclude? Since de Reali's role as a hunter is highlighted, the question of who is being *hunted* in this photo arises.

Pieces of furniture with non-human animal parts are labelled "bizarre", foregrounding their external appearance over the meaning they represent, thus preventing deeper reflection. Again, the concept of Carol J. Adams may be helpful: should non-human animals still be considered *objects* rather than *subjects*?

Finally, photographs (without any information, not even the year, the place or the people in the photos, which would have required a little more space) are considered "suggestive", continuing the idea of Africa as a scenario for the European eye, and in any case not explaining what kind of suggestion they convey: the beauty of the hunt? wonderful species that are no longer seen because they are extinct? "Untouched nature"? History of photography? Photomontage?

Regarding Pigazzi de Reali, in her book *Alcuni appunti del mio viaggio al Congo* - which can be read in the bigger room - the descriptions are given both on the populations and on the environment. In the spectacular description, only the aesthetic and formal aspects are taken into consideration: this theatricality is due to the unwillingness to engage with the *African spectacle* that was taking place, which led to the perpetuation of the dichotomy of fear and wonder that prevailed in descriptions of Africa in this era (Cadamuro, 2018). Pigazzi de Reali often compared African people to non-human animals to describe them. For example, while trying to take pictures of some naked girls, she said they "run away like *monkeys*", or when after the kill of a crocodile "the blacks<sup>7</sup> all *pounce* for a piece of meat". Another significant quote read as follows: "In a village, we ask about the Chief and, after ten minutes of dialogue with the interpreter, the wild black man who was closed and suspicious with his 6 wives comes out of a den, low and black!". Here the *black* man is described as *closed*, *suspicious* and in a *black den*, like a non-human animal. Here also the polygamy topic is present: in fact, in this kind of book, the relationship between men and women is usually highlighted as opposed to Christian values, and women are presented as naked and submitted, attractive and charming. However, this charm is not considered in a very positive way and is therefore seen as a trait that is more animal

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<sup>7</sup>In the original text they are called "i mori", which can also indicate "Moors" and it was usually used for Muslim people. However, in the Venetian dialect the term usually means black people. For this reason, I have decided to translate the term with "the blacks".

- in a derogatory way - than human (Cadamuro, 2018). And again, regarding the work of “the whites”, for improving the situation in Africa:

“The small and pretty church is already complete when we enter; they are all natives patiently educated by these excellent missionaries. The organ begins to play and the voices of these poor savages, baptized and convinced, full of faith in God, rise mystical and solemn. I confess that I shed a few tears, I am not ashamed to say it: these functions in the heart of Africa, in the midst of half-naked people who pray with such dignity and devotion, move me. They are directed magnificently, they sing in tune, and the Bishop enters and gives everyone his blessing: this missionary is a magnificent type, he has been here for 25 years, in the midst of his savages to lead them to God, teaching them the truth and civilisation; the result of so much tireless work, one cannot imagine! ! [...] Now, after 25 years of tireless work, there are many Christians and remarkable brain development in the natives. The progress made by these populations, both in terms of concept and materials, has great evidence.”

In this excerpt from the diary, the main recurring themes of the time can be seen: Europeans who, through their hard work, managed to educate African peoples who were considered poor, uncivilised and savage, with half-naked people who, thanks to the settlers, have developed their brains and are therefore on the road to progress.

The analysis of the elements, space and terminology has therefore made it clear that elements of a colonial matrix are still present in the museum, which can lead one to wonder if it makes sense and if it is appropriate to maintain these narratives with so little contextualisation today.

# Chapter 4

## Decolonisation, restitutions and outcomes

### 4.1 The decolonisation

As discussed in previous chapters, museum practices and institutions have changed greatly over time and have been influenced by concepts such as science, knowledge, race, “animality”, and many others. Therefore, museums can be seen as a physical and intellectual threshold between the past and present (Biscottini & De Curtis, 2021). Nowadays, museums face increasing efforts to become more inclusive by opening up to different social realities and heritages. In this sense, it is contemporaneity that makes a museum a place, an institution, and a medium useful for understanding society and world events. The first chapter was therefore dedicated to the relationship between museums, colonialism and non-human animals, while the second and third chapters focused on the Natural History Museum of Venice as a practical example of an Italian natural history museum that has materials that are generally considered “ethnographic” rather than “scientific”.

On the one hand, museums have a tangible, physical heritage given by the objects they contain; on the other hand, they must find other ways to communicate cultures, indigenous knowledge, beliefs, and more that are intangible. However, the separation, as also advocated by UNESCO, is arbitrary and becomes a problem when museums are unable to create new forms of dialogue and overcome colonial practices (Kirshenblatt-Gimblett, 2005). Anna Tsing (2005), in her work on global connections, sees *friction* as the result of the interaction of people and things in a globalised world, as a creative force that co-produces cultures<sup>1</sup>. In this view, museums can be institutions that function as contact

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<sup>1</sup>Recalling somehow the idea of seeing culture not from an ethnological but from a mestizo logic - Amselle, 2017.



zones where frictions from cross-cultural flows are present and create new relationships and movements (Harrison, 2015). Coloniality is a factor that has characterised museums since their inception, and for this reason, post- and decolonial currents also collide with the concept of museums and their practises and consequences.

The term decolonisation comes from the transnational dialogue that emerged in Latin American territories to analyse the relationship between power, modernity, and capitalism. Since the works of Ngũgĩ wa Thiong’O, the English term *decolonising* has come to refer not only to political but also to cultural and social processes, in the meaning that is generally still used today - in Fanon’s words (1963), one could thus speak of the “total liberation that encompasses all facets of our personality”. This shift in perspective allows academics and activists to broaden the analysis and question all cultural elements of contemporary societies as a critique of the very concept of modernity, which is based on a systemic violence of domination over non-Whites and minorities in general, and on which ideals such as capitalism and progress are based. The resulting dialogue therefore aims to overcome the deeply rooted ideas of the colonisers, which are also unconsciously adopted by the colonised, in order to allow for a global analysis of all factors - including the concept of scientific knowledge in museums themselves, since this usually excludes other ways of understanding reality (Torre, Benegiamo & Dal Gobbo, 2020). Ariese & Wróblewska then propose the distinction between decolonising and practised decoloniality, as in their opinion the second term in museums refers to “a process and a way of thinking that goes deeper to unhook the present colonial hooks from the museum” (2022: 12). As mentioned earlier, the dominant colonial narratives are still present in the European museum, even though the critique of them has been voiced for a long time (Haeckel, 2021).

In *Decolonizzare il museo*, Grechi (2021) begins with a scene from the Marvel film *Black Panther* (2018), in which the Afro-descendant subject Killmonger enters a museum and begins a conversation with its white curator that ends with him highlighting how the African-origin materials present in the space were illegally taken from populations. Not only does this call into question the legality with which the objects entered the museum, but it also creates another conflict: between the culture of the curator, who has studied these finds for years, and the culture of Killmonger, about whom almost nothing is known, but who seems to have a deeper knowledge of the curator - and as mentioned earlier, this follows the theory that museums do not usually consider visitors as a source of knowledge (Perin, 1995; Rose, 2007). This scene, albeit in a film with imaginary places, people, and worlds, is somehow still very applicable to contemporary museums, both ethnographic and non-ethnographic: the simple, clear, and linear dialogue and dynamics make this powerful scene resonate in several articles that deal with decoloniality and

## 4.1 The decolonisation

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museums (e.g., Mattola, 2020; Scott, 2019). The critique that the scene is moving toward an inclusive and democratic museum institution reflects the questions raised by the post- and decolonial movements (Grechi, 2021), as well as the need to have museums that reflect contemporaneity in general (Amselle, 2017; Biscottini & Curtis, 2021).

Postcolonial studies seek to illuminate all Western narratives in which fear of the *Other* is exorcised, leading to its discrimination and the dominant and superior position of the West (Said, 1991): decolonisation revises the central position of national museums that have maintained the distinction between “us” and “others” throughout time (Bodenstein & Pagani, 2017). It is therefore the terminology proposed by the postcolonial critique to denote liberation from the idea of the cultural, moral, and technological superiority of the West - which was used to justify the damage and violence against the colonies. Postcolonial criticism also introduces the concept of *remediation*, which refers to decolonial practises of the cultural and social structures of contemporary society. Initially thought to refer to the readjustment of more traditional media (such as cinema and photography) to the arrival of digital media, *remediation* is now used to *correct the mistakes* made by colonial narratives (Mattola, 2020). The museum has a positive face (to be appreciated) and a negative face (not to be disturbed), and it tends all too obviously to show only the positive. In this sense, decolonial movements and theories can help to show the negative side of museums, that is, the one linked to their racist and colonial matrix, in order to improve their role as institutions and places for contemporary societies.

The way in which decolonisation takes place depends on the type of society: as pointed out above, not all nations have the same colonial past, and not all have the same sensitivity to that past or the same will to confront it. For this reason, listing a few examples - even if they differ in location and methodology - is one way to show the variety of actions that the decolonial key offers. For example, applying a postcolonial lens, as done by Tolia-Kelly and Rosanna Raymond (2016) to the Maōri heads at the British Museum in relation to the bodies of Maōri visitors, can be an important consideration. The research highlights how the display of the heads turns the museum into a *theatre of pain*, where an epistemological violence (through the categorisation of objects) and a materialisation of the *death* of artefacts takes place - in the creation of a *mausoleum* rather than a *museum*, as mentioned in chapter one with Alberti’s (2011) reflection. In other words, “museum cabinets, viewed through a postcolonial lens, expose the continuity of imperial taxonomies and cultural hierarchies that underpin their use” (Tolia-Kelly, 2016: 897), where non-European cultures, in this case the Maōri, continue to be seen and misrepresented as “other”. Following many authors, e.g. Baxandall (1995), this case therefore highlights how the exhibition of culture proceeds through a construction

of values and ideas about it. However, the power difference between the two actors - the museum and the Maōri bodies - must also be taken into account, as the non-dominant culture does not have the opportunity to rewrite itself, and in this way the dominant narrative is further reinforced through perpetuation, creating a “dysphoria” in museums. In a postcolonial key, therefore, the heads of the Maōri are transformed from metaphors for local society to bodies endowed with sensibility, poetics, and capabilities, thus “collapsing Maōri space-time out of respect for universal space-time” (Tolia-Kelly, 2016: 904) and enabling self-determination, dynamism, and heterogeneity.

Mattola (2020) takes the Tate Modern and the Brooklyn Museum in a decolonial key as examples to explore how the privileged user of art-and in museums in general, as seen in Chapter 1 - described by Pollock (1987) as a white, middle-class, able-bodied, heterosexual male can lead to the *Other* being defeated, romanticised, despised, and denaturalised through the use of narratives with a Western matrix. The author also expresses that real change doesn't occur so much within museums, but rather from the outside, thanks to activism that, as a decolonizing element, seeks to reduce the distance between cultural institutions and different ethnic groups and societies. Examples cited include the *Black Lives Matter* movement, also described by ICOM as a turning point, and *Decolonize This Place*, a New York movement that combines feminist views and the defence of Native Americans and African Americans.

In summary, heritage is seen in this way as “the feelings of being, becoming, and belonging” rather than just static materiality (Waterton & Watson, 2013). This may be a useful point for natural history museums that present collections or objects in general that are seen as ethnographic to enhance the display and analyse the presence of colonial or racial biases that still exist. In relation to science museums, Haupt et al. (2022) highlight the main problems that do not allow DEAI changes to be implemented - that is, improvements regarding Diversity, Equity, Access, and Inclusion. These changes relate to the fact that each individual crosses different axes that characterise their social identity, such as race, gender, ability, or class, which affects power in society (similar to what Kopytoff, 1986, has noted). This power can consist of dominating others (as in the case of Pollock, a heterosexual white male) or being oppressed (e.g., a disabled black woman). This *intersectionality* (Crenshaw, 1991) of identity, as shown in previous chapters, is also found in museums, where the culture is generally characterised by a high status of *whiteness*, which is not only related to those who are already in the museums, but also to those who may enter them: the more an individual does not conform to these canons, the more difficult it will be to be admitted to museums (Haupt et al., 2022).

The inability of today's museum to face the present because it lacks dynamism leads

## 4.1 The decolonisation

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to questioning its more traditional practices (Biscottini & De Curtis, 2021). Therefore, as a link between experience and culture, the museum needs to explore more artistic practices that engage the public. An example of such practices is the proposal *Healing the Museum*, the work of British-Kenyan artist Grace Ndiritu. Focusing precisely on the *transformation of the contemporary world* (a notion that again recalls the concepts of Biscottini & De Curtis, 2021), the artist proposes a multisensory experience in which participants are invited to practice listening, receiving, giving, and sharing. Most importantly, they are invited to discover peace and mutual trust in order to understand how all people are connected in a kind of holistic image. Drawing on non-Western practices such as shamanism and meditations, the experience is based on the concept of the commons and shared ownership, overcoming the power dynamics between different individuals and in projection between different classes and nations. In this way, those who participate in the experience become aware of their agency in the space of museum institutions, and alternative ways of seeing and existing are experienced that go beyond dualism, borders, and prejudices in the same spaces that have fed them for centuries: museums can thus be sites of experience outside of traditional visits, and thus use their spaces for different forms of experience to try to narrate the contemporary world in numerous forms and ways (Ndiritu, 2021).

Decolonisation as a way to avoid colonial attitudes is well illustrated in these key examples, but as mentioned in the first chapter, colonialism is also related to the way non-human animals are approached, not just human subjects. Hunting, agriculture, and the role and lives of animals have been addressed in 20th century ethnographies, which has allowed us to move beyond the concept of 'anthropos' and 'ethnos' and from Latour's 'we were never modern' (1993) to Haraway's 'we were never human' (2004) (Kirksey & Helmreich, 2010). In *When Species Meet* (2003), Donna Haraway embraced this emerging sensibility by arguing that animals are not instruments but entities and agents "to live *with*" and "to become *with*" revisiting the concept of "companion species" and extending it to new areas of contact<sup>2</sup>. To better explain the relationship between non-human animals and decolonial discourses, I again draw on a book by Aph Ko, the author mentioned in the first chapter, *Aphro-ism* (2018), which she co-authored with her sister Syl Ko. In this book, the authors illustrate the broad but fragile correlation between feminism, veganism, and decolonial movements. The call for revolution, seen as having epistemological origins, arises from reflection on the adjective "animal", which is used to commit violence and denigrate human beings. Often, "animal" is perceived and referred to as the opposite of "human", i.e., lacking reason, morality, or other human characteristics. However, the

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<sup>2</sup>To experience how animals and objects are related see the interactive site *Animals as Objects?* <https://animalsasobjects.org/>

authors emphasise that the term “human” does not in fact refer to a typical characteristic of all members of the species *Homo sapiens*, but only to European whiteness - thus naturalising a universal ideal of reference to *Homo sapiens* (which is then extended to other concepts such as femininity).

The concepts of human/humanity and animal/animality thus fall into the realm of racial discourses, of “truths” created by white Europeans against other cultures. For this reason, for example, claiming to possess “humanity” in order to gain social visibility risks performing the process of humanisation in ways that resemble animalisation, so that humanisation becomes “the act of affirming one’s resemblance to “humans” i.e., to whites” (p. 60). Attention to animalisation practises toward racially elite people is part of the analyses of racism and colonialism, as precursors to assault and violence based on the negative concept of “animal” (expendable): “the human-animal dualism is the foundation ideology that supports the conceptual framework of white supremacy” (p.86) and thus racism. Therefore, to overcome white supremacy, it is necessary to destroy or reinterpret the dualism of “animal” and “human,” which is considered “irrelevant” or a “reference model”. To achieve this, it is necessary to get out of the dynamic created by the dominant Eurocentric logic rooted in most social systems: “as long as animals are oppressed, as long as “animal” means something degrading, we will never be free” (Ko & Ko, 2018: 206). This role of non-human animals in decolonial practises can be applied across disciplines and in different analyses. In general, fields that view the role of non-human actors differently have gained traction in recent decades, shifting the notion of humans as the core of the social and cultural order (Deckha, 2019). According to Alice J. Hovorka, the field of Animal Geographies is an example of a global phenomenon (i.e., the distribution of animal species) influenced by racial, cultural, and colonial dynamics and politics: in her words,

“a focus on animal-based agriculture reveals global reach of Western-influenced factory farming, a focus on wild animal conservation exposes colonially-instigated and racially-charged ideas about which animals ‘matter’ and need protection, and a focus on domestic animal welfare issues expose culturally-diverse perspectives on the ethical use or treatment of animals” (2017: 383).

The exploitation of non-human animals, typical of Western society, was brought into the world by European imperialism through policies and management strategies, making this area of research good ground for colonial, postcolonial, and decolonial processes. Another area where the role of non-human animals departs from tradition is multispecies

ethnography (Kirksey & Helmreich, 2010). Here, attention is focused on species previously considered more marginal - such as non-human animals, plants, fungi, and microbes - that thus take on greater relevance, including their role in human well-being. However, human-animal oppression is still often analysed in a non-political way, which limits the ability to address the many issues related to the dispossession, use, abuse - and empirical evidence in general - of humans vis-à-vis non-human animals. Some examples include the correlation between the increase in humans and the increase in damage to other species, and the fact that *Homo sapiens*, unlike many other species, are no longer bound by environmental constraints (Hopnina, 2017), which brings the discussion to a moral and ethical level. Considering that hunting, collecting, and exhibiting wildlife were acts related to the colonial idea of empire (Ryan, 2000) and typical of museums, decolonisation thus revises the central position of national museums that have maintained the distinction between “us” and “others” over time (Bodenstein & Pagani, 2017). This distinction has been made not only between human cultures, but also between human and non-human animals. Therefore, it is worth considering how natural history and anthropology museums have treated and continue to treat some individuals as passive objects rather than active subjects (Conn, 2006).

However, the decolonisation process that museums undergo in both Western and non-Western countries (Chipangura & Chipangura, 2020) is multi-layered, complex, and not always provided with a clear anti-racist matrix. Echoing Amselle, these situations and these considerations make the museum seem “stricken with infamy” and can lead one to wonder “whether it is not the museum form itself, as a place of confinement for the works, that must disappear” (2017:106). The appropriation of objects, knowledge, and experiences that underlie museums is a symbol of Western culture *devouring* and *digesting* others through the museum: “wouldn’t the time, rather, have come for museums to regurgitate these works, to return them to the heirs of their creators, even at the risk of suppressing the form of the museum itself?” (Amselle, 2017: 106).

## 4.2 Restitution

Based on Amselle’s question, the question may arise of how the museum can *regurgitate* such works and how this proposal is then put into practice to overcome the domination of dominant narratives in museums. The ICOM guidelines (VI) recall the importance for today’s museums to engage with the populations from which the finds originate and to be able to return them, and this dialogue with the realities from which the objects originate is obviously an issue that is also addressed by post- and decolonial movements. These

practices also fall within the framework of the considerations presented by Kinsley in the first chapter, which relate to the social justice of museums. The *legitimate claim*<sup>3</sup> that many non-European populations make for the return of their property can be defined as *restitution*, the act of returning an object to its rightful owner. Furthermore, in the museum field, the term *repatriation* refers to the return of ancestral human remains to their original location. Consequently, these situations also imply that something was acquired legitimately or fairly, regardless of how much time has passed. Thus, there is an attempt to compensate, recognise, and make amends for a crime committed, based on a new type of relationship compared to the previous one (Sarr & Savoy, 2018).

Thus, the principles of equality and social justice are extended to the preservation of cultural heritage in terms of universal aesthetics, which takes place mainly in European and North American museums. Restitution thus becomes an area where transitional justice can act as a *diagnostic tool* to advance debates about identity and decolonisation (McAuliffe, 2021).

Often, the issue of restitution is addressed more in countries such as the United States, France, England, Australia, and Germany<sup>4</sup> than in Italy. In the U.S., for example, the Native American Graves Protection and Repatriation Act (NAGPRA) was introduced to ensure greater equality in museum identities and structures (Mattola, 2020). Specifically, the act gives Native American communities the right to repatriate objects and human bones from state museums. This has allowed curators to establish contacts with these communities, which is beneficial for the museum, and has allowed communities to create a collective memory to heal, restore, and share their identities, thanks in part to the creation of their own museums (Turgeon & Dubuc, 2002). One of the museums that has generally addressed the issue of restitution is the Smithsonian's National Museum of Natural History (Turner, 2015), both in relation to objects originating from Native American communities and objects from other states. In France, a groundbreaking step on restitution was taken in 2018 when a report on the restitution of Sub-Saharan African heritage was commissioned. Here, colonial appropriation of cultural heritage is seen as transgressive and without any apparatus - legal, administrative, cultural, or economic - that could legitimise it. Restitution, which is still ongoing, is the result of a long debate that has been going on in France for many years and that, over time, has allowed the return of objects stolen in the past to other states - particularly in sub-Saharan Africa (Sarr & Savoy, 2018). In England, there have been pushes to return objects belonging to

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<sup>3</sup>See Amadou-Mahtar M'Bow, "Pour le retour, à ceux qui l'ont créé, d'un patrimoine culturel irremplaçable" (Museum, vol. 31, number 1, page 58 - 1979).

<sup>4</sup>An example is the Grassi Museum in Leipzig: <https://grassivoelkerkunde.skd.museum/en/research/decolonisation-restitution-and-repatriation/>

## 4.2 Restitution

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many nations, including Greece, Iraq, Palestine, Australia (Brennan, 2019; Imbler, 2019), and Chile (Returning Heritage, 2019). In Australia, state museums have changed to support Aboriginal rights, and Aboriginal participation is now fundamental to collecting, preserving, exhibiting, and interpreting their cultural heritage (Pickering, 2015; Schultz, 2014). One of the few examples, albeit ethnographic, of a museum that is advancing the reappraisal of Italy's colonial past is the *Museo delle Civiltà* (MuCiv), which was also mentioned in the interviews. The *Museo delle Colonie* or *Museo Coloniale di Roma* was founded in Rome in 1923. It then became the ideal place for fascist propaganda, in 1935 it took the name *Museo dell'Africa Italiana*, then closed in 1937 and reopened from 1947 to 1971 under the name *Museo Africano*. When it closed again, the collections passed first to the Italian Institute for Africa and the Orient and then to the Luigi Pigorini Ethnographic Museum, which in 2017 became part of the new Museum of Civilisations (MuCiv) museum pole, along with the Museum of Arts and Popular Traditions, the Museum of the Early Middle Ages, and the Giuseppe Tucci Museum of Oriental Art (MuCiv, n.d.).

MuCiv's rearrangement is currently making the material and epistemological violence of colonialism a central and explicit point of its exhibitions in order to provoke reflection. An example of this is the exhibition *[S]oggetti migranti. Dietro le cose le persone*, opened in 2012, in which the concept of migration was applied to objects and thus considered as subjects (Grechi, 2021). Another example is the project from 2017, which involved a collaboration between art (artist Leone Contini) and anthropology (anthropologist Arnd Schneider) to represent and analyse intercultural frictions and power relations (Schneider, 2020). It is interesting how the descriptions of both projects strongly emphasise Italian amnesia towards the colonial past - in line with what was also seen in Chapter 1. In general, the MuCiv is one of the rare examples in Italy where a museum with a colonial character reflects on its identity and its role in society and works on itself for society, also in terms of the return of materials.

One problem that arises in relation to restitution is the lack of adequate legislation on the subject, which, although now considered part of museum culture, is at the same time in need of improvement and unification, including legal and cultural (Harris, 2015). Returning to the Venetian museum and the Miani collection, for example, restitution would conflict with the *Società Geografica Italiana*'s obligation to exhibit, leading to a situation that would largely need to be resolved legally. In the absence of national mandates, museums are primarily responsible for restitution. However, this leads them to easily blur offering loans, co-curation, or co-management rather than repayment, an inappropriate negotiation in their favour. Interestingly, however, there have been no problems with the return of art, goods, and human remains confiscated during the Holocaust, adding weight



to the colonial - or rather, racist - component of the phenomenon. Moreover, museum storage facilities are rich in material cultural heritage that is not exhibited and is only useful when needed for research purposes. In general, restitution can be beneficial for museums because it prevents them from continuing to have a monopoly on the production of knowledge based on *plunder* (Bond, 1995), but instead fosters new collaborations that can lead to new knowledge and new visions (McAuliffe, 2021).

### 4.3 A proposal for the trophy rooms

With regard to the Venetian museum, which is the case study of this thesis, it has already been mentioned in the previous chapters and shown to contain examples of the perpetuation of acts of colonial origin, as well as other similar museums that have been used as further examples for comparison. This section will therefore focus on three practical actions that could be considered - in addition to the conceptual actions already mentioned - to improve the practices of this museum. In addition to the general attention that should be given to measures such as re-establishing the office to monitor the experience of the public and promoting, as also pointed out by the director himself, the use of the audio pen for a better visit, the interventions that I would like to reflect on are the following: 1) the use of captions; 2) outreach to countries of origin; 3) rethinking the museum space.

Regarding the use of captions, I refer to a consideration Rose makes in *Visual Methodologies*, “what might be the effect of taking all the labels and captions away?” (2007:187). Given the scarcity of these sources of information in the museum and the museum’s desire to keep them to a minimum, my thoughts go in the opposite direction: what would be the impact of allowing all labels and captions? For example, what would be the advantages and disadvantages of adding captions to the photographs in the Reali Room? In this case, the captions could at least include the year, location, and non-human animals and people involved (who are more or less known from the photo), or a brief description of the non-human animal photographed and some information about its possible extinction or conservation: not too much information would be needed, but at least some so that visitors can better understand what they are dealing with. Another idea would be to allow visitors to view files (as is the case with hunting trophies) or QR codes (although museum staff have stressed that they would prefer phones not be used during the visit), perhaps organised in places that are not too eye-catching - as the museum would like. This would allow more information to be given on the spot to those who want it - without them having to search for it when they return home and perhaps forgetting some details

### 4.3 A proposal for the trophy rooms

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- and an explanation to those who are hesitant, as was done at the Smithsonian <sup>5</sup>. In this way, the museum can still help deepen the visitors' level of information, and could prepare questions, information, or guides that visitors can take with them in the room and return or take home at the end of the visit - this way, it can also get more feedback on which to base changes, conferences, or findings.

Because of their placement, captioning directly under each stuffed animal in the rooms is much more complex, and so I think adding captions to photos can improve the overall situation. Even though “one cannot do without the caption, while recognising its annoying presence” (Biscottini & Curtis, 2021: 95), one could focus on how to make the caption, i.e., the point of contact between the material and the visitor, central to the museum experience. In this way, further denigration of the non-human animals present could be avoided, such as the option of putting light bulbs in the mouths of the two pythons proposed in the interviews, thus maintaining a vision of the animal remains not as subjects but as mere objects, or in this case, even as carriers. In the Miani Room, on the other hand, given the sparse information on the objects themselves, the addition of some captions would increase the information content and allow for a better contextualisation of the space. In both halls, however, the information on the explanatory panels (both written and through photographs) should be revised to give more space, for example, to the contextualisation of the explorer as an example of colonial practise, the role that the local population played in the Europeans' safaris (in de Reali), and to better explain the nature of the ethnographic collections (in Miani). The goal, then, would be for the labels not to be a burden but a help to the visitor, for the Miani room not to glorify the explorer but to analyse the practise he carried out, and for the de Reali rooms not to “annoy” visitors but to stimulate their curiosity and transform this feeling into a positive sense of analysis and possibly a desire to improve the situation regarding the biodiversity crisis and animal conservation.

In general, it is always important to remember that language is a social semiotics influenced by intentionality and ideology (in more or less conscious ways), and that the relationship between actors and the text itself (Halliday, 1978) is also related to the exercise of power, which in turn defines social and political realities: as “Trojan horses”, words therefore contain abstract meanings that then have “a plastic effect” on reality (Borghini, 2020).

Regarding contacts with countries of origin, I argued above that decolonisation can also benefit the museum and society. I also believe that the right of countries from which materials have been taken - whether objects or once-living remains - to have them

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<sup>5</sup>See chapter 3 and interviews with staff, in which it is explained how especially in the rooms de Reali fast visitors do not grasp the meaning of the exhibition.

returned is a fundamental step in becoming aware of one's colonial past and recognising the importance of decoloniality in contemporary society. Furthermore, while writing my dissertation, I often wondered about a concept: how is it possible to explain a collection when we know next to nothing about what it's composed of? In the case of the Venetian Museum, the lack of information relates primarily to the Miani collection, which in any case serves to explain the discoverer rather than the objects it contains. While it's not the goal of the museum to talk about the peoples from whom the finds come, does this narrative, based only on the discoverers, not perpetuate the view of other peoples as objects rather than subjects? Or, to put it another way, does it make sense to give voice to de Reali and Miani without explicitly, clearly, and directly reflecting the colonial nature of the museum pieces so that as many visitors as possible can understand it? In my opinion, the answer is no, if you want a contemporary museum, that is, a museum that deals with current issues - such as the colonial heritage in museum institutions. For this reason, opening to other types of knowledge or to Western-oriented knowledge and not only to academic knowledge is essential. During the interview, the director emphasised that knowledge about the collection must be communicated through an academic publication: This is in line with the European idea of knowledge, which limits or excludes other forms of knowledge. But this closure, this obfuscation, can lead to not knowing and appreciating a material just because it's not explained in the "right way". And one day it could happen, as in the film *Black Panther*, when Killmonger asks the curator if she's sure of the information she's giving, and she realises that her knowledge isn't complete because she lacks contact with the people from whom the objects came - physically and culturally.

The last point I would like to address is the available museum space. This is mainly related to a characteristic of the city of Venice, namely its insecurity. In *If Venice dies* (2014), Salvatore Settis points out that there are three ways a city can die: being destroyed by an enemy, being colonised by a foreign people, or having inhabitants who lose their memory of themselves. Venice is indeed losing more and more inhabitants, and the few that are still there are getting older and older, in favour of the monopoly of tourism. The museum, which is not exclusively linked to tourism (by choice, as the director said during the interview), should therefore be a place where local memory is preserved. On the other hand, it is also a place classified as a World Heritage Site by UNESCO and therefore subject to laws for the preservation of cultural and architectural heritage. However, as was evident from my interviews, the museum encounters a problem in the building in which it is located, due to the "static" nature of the spaces. This contradicts the idea of a contemporary and dynamic museum, as the spaces themselves must also be flexible (Biscottini & Curtis, 2021). Thus, if on the one hand the museum is a place of resistance,

### 4.3 A proposal for the trophy rooms

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on the other hand it appears as a place with a static character: the balance between content and container is therefore a problem that can occur in this museum.

To solve this problem, two possibilities seem to be possible for the spaces under study: modification of the contents or modification of the container. In the first case, the mode of exposure would have to be changed, and in the second, the location. Both options involve a great deal of work due to the exhibition constraints to which the rooms are subject, but could result in long-term benefits to the community by providing more appropriate venues for exhibition - always in a contemporary museum key. In addition, as indicated earlier, the rooms were intended to show the evolution of the museum's scientific collection, but their sequence does not quite do so: the *Wunderkammern* and the long room with the cabinets, as well as the library, are physically after the Miani and de Reali (and also Ligabue), but chronologically before them. We can therefore say that it is a problem of placement, but conditioned by the architecture of the building, to which certain changes cannot be made for reasons of conservation.

Is the fact that the museum was, as the director puts it, "born here" sufficient motivation to keep it here? Is Coen's 1920s decision to locate the museum at the Fondego dei Turchi still acceptable in today's museum environment? I contend that a differently organised space, if desired, would allow for important changes to the museum. Should the fact that the museum is praised as an example of the preservation of the history of museology be transmitted through the preservation of the exhibits in their entirety or rather through their interpretation, perhaps using tools to recreate the past and the present? An example of this is the *Museo del Novecento* in Mestre (M9), where a simple augmented reality viewer allows you to virtually enter rooms from another era without having to recreate entire environments. Spaces where one can play instruments and hear their sounds, where one understands that hunting trophies represent non-human animals killed by white Europeans and charged with colonial and racist meanings, and where one has the time to deepen knowledge could benefit the museum, which could thus become a medium for understanding the present through the analysis of the past. For example, as pointed out in the interviews, children have a different sensibility than adults (Frazier & Gelman, 2009). Jones (2022) emphasises the importance of considering these different audiences (different in many ways) for successful exhibitions. In particular, the author points out that the most important issues in this regard are related to the appropriateness of the environment, the congruence between the topics covered and children's interests and needs, and the beliefs and perceptions that lead us to consider museums as welcoming places to foster early childhood development. This last point highlights museums as good places for learning, but also for children's cognitive, emotional, and social development

as spaces where questions, knowledge, and interpretation emerge. The author points out that various studies have shown that children see “the real thing” as a special object and, at the same time, express a special appreciation when there is a physical interaction with the objects: in other words, the experience is more relevant when it involves multisensory stimulation. Given that children make up a significant portion of museum audiences and that it is critical for museums to understand the nature of their audiences, it is important to note, as Jones points out, that children are particularly interested in and attracted to objects that are familiar to them because they allow for the establishment of personal connections that are also based on experiences, interests, and prior knowledge: dialogue and recognisability of the exhibit therefore have an even greater impact than multisensory or hands-on exposure. Consequently, a greater variety of content, objects, and media would create a better learning environment for the younger set. On this basis, and following on from what has been said about the change in museums in terms of the senses to be used there, the Venetian Museum could let the public try out some objects, such as the instruments in Miani’s room, to allow deeper interaction with them. However, there are two possibilities: the use of the “original” objects or the use of their “copies” recreated by the museum. The second case, which is more feasible from a regulatory point of view, would allow not only to use the visual component, but also to better experience the objects thanks to personal experience - similar to what happened in the past with the gorilla to touch.

Nevertheless, these reflections spring from a vision in which the existing materials eventually become copies of those returned to the original populations (at the initiative of the museum), in which the Miani Room is an example of how to deal with the long history of Italian colonialism, where the de Reali rooms are places to reflect on the extent to which the concepts of “science” and “animal” themselves have racist and colonial roots, and where the museum is the place where, first and foremost, an encounter must take place in order to understand the world.

With this thesis, I argue that natural history museums should be considered as places where the relationship between the human and non-human animals present is a point that reflects the nature/culture binary. As will become clear throughout the thesis, this binarism also has roots in racist and colonial thought, and for this reason its presence in museums makes these places its projections. Although museums are constantly evolving to adapt to the needs and sensibilities of societies, they must be attentive to the conditions, assumptions, and modalities of the exhibition so as not to risk modernising the tools (e.g., QR code or touchscreen) without simultaneously rethinking the foundations of the exhibition (vitrines, glass, diorama). However, this profound change becomes complicated,

### 4.3 A proposal for the trophy rooms

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as in the case of the Venetian Museum, when the staff is exclusively “scientifically” trained and therefore external people have to be brought in.

Non-human animals must therefore be seen as a medium through which anthropocentric ideas are conveyed, for example, by defining them as “objects”, by omitting their biographies, or by continuing to see them as “animals” rather than “non-human animals”. These views, which reflect what is still called the scientific mentality, are challenged by Critical Animal Studies because they do not allow us to overcome the binaristic approach and thus distance ourselves from anthropocentric and racist actions and ideals. Consequently, the relationship between human and non-human animals becomes a discourse of equality, rights, biocentrism, and ecocentrism.

# Conclusion

The aim of this paper was to illustrate the presence of colonialism in today's natural history museums, using the example of the Natural History Museum of Venice, and to consider not only humans but also non-human animals as colonised. In doing so, I chose methodological approaches from Critical Animal Studies (CAS) and the Social Sciences, particularly those related to the representation of non-human animals and their connections to colonialist views. In this way, I was able to apply these approaches to the real case of the Venetian museum in order to shed light on its critical aspects and reflect on contemporary natural history museums in general.

The first chapter provided an overview of the history of museums, their relationship to colonialism, and the concept of “animalism”. Starting with etymology and the ICOM definition to better understand the term, I then showed that there are different types of museums today, with different organisations and styles. In particular, the ethnographic museum and the natural science museum were presented as models that relate to the Venetian museum. Then, the history of museums, especially from the 16th century to the present, was discussed, highlighting the changes and their character. Already here it was possible to introduce the binary concept of nature/culture of exhibitions and how it was fundamental for colonial actions at that time to legitimise racism towards non-white and European people. It then discussed how museums today should be places and institutions where it is possible to understand the present and reflect on social and political issues, thus acquiring a *transformative* role (Amselle 2017; Biscottini & Curtis, 2021).

I then analysed some examples of how the museum can play this role. The topic of colonialism and its relationship with “science” was then addressed in depth through the practises by which this link has been solidified over time and the role that ethnographic and natural history museums have played - and continue to play - in this process. It was also necessary to explain Italian colonialism and to show that society still tries not to talk about it or, when it does talk about it, it resorts to misconceptions - including the myth of the “Italiani, brava gente” (Filippi, 2021). The activities of the museums themselves were therefore read in relation to colonial actions in order to show their commonalities.

### 4.3 A proposal for the trophy rooms

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The focus was on how the African continent was seen and perceived by white Europeans and how they encountered it - according to racist ideals. From objectifying black and indigenous people, I moved to objectifying non-human animals, which are in fact often used as a comparison or metaphor for non-Western people. The way people view non-human animals is related to the same exclusionary, speciesist, patriarchal, and racist European view that can be traced back to the nature of colonialism. In particular, it was shown that the depiction of non-human animals is a way to support and reinforce such ideals.

Another focus was on taxidermy and the role it played in museums in maintaining the binary opposition of “humanity”/“animality” that saw the male - able, heterosexual, white, and European - subject as the dominant one, evident, for example, in the selection of individuals to be displayed, their first names, and their postures. In this part, reference was made mainly to three authors - Adams, Haraway and Parreñas - whose feminist and antispeciesist approach allows us to fully understand the relationship between scientific vision, colonialism and non-human animals. The first chapter was therefore fundamental to introduce the concepts analysed in the thesis, their history, their contexts, and the reasons why they should be considered when looking at a museum. This part was also useful to better understand why in Italy the academic world and the population are still insensitive or little interested in the colonial past, which is also reflected in the way museums and their function as institutions are approached.

The second chapter is devoted to the case study, namely the Giancarlo Ligabue Museum of Natural History in Venice. After an introduction on the origins of the museum since Correr and its changes over time, the general organisation of the present exhibition was described. I continued with an analysis of the ethnographic collections, focusing in particular on the Miani and de Reali collections: this allowed me to understand the way they were created and the ideologies expressed through them (Castelli, 2006). Again, the collections were annotated in the context of Italian colonial history for better contextualisation. The third part was dedicated to the interviews I conducted with the museum staff, including the museum guide, the taxidermist, the directors of the Miani and de Reali rooms, and the director. Following Heumann Gurian (1995), this gave me the opportunity to better understand the general approach of the museum. The fact that the interviews were oral allowed for better interaction with the staff by bringing up some concepts emphatically and seeing how they responded immediately. The interviews were then annotated, also using the concepts of the first chapter, and served as a basis for the analysis of the next chapter. This part was fundamental to understand how the current museum was created, what were the main stages and what are the guiding principles



of the museum. All this is indispensable to understand how to treat the analysis and commentary in a decolonial key, since every museum has a history behind it that has determined its present, and at the same time it is located within a nation that also has a history that influences it. Finally, the museum organisation is also defined by the people who work there, and it is therefore essential to consider all these aspects in order to keep the context in mind.

The third chapter is dedicated to the analysis of the spaces of Miani and de Reali, taking into account their origins and those of the museum, highlighted in the second chapter, and relating them to what was said in the first chapter. After a general overview of the main concepts, I decided to focus the study on three aspects: the elements, the space and the terminology. The analysis draws on works by authors such as Haraway, Perin, and Rose, as they have allowed me to establish a linear contextualisation of the explicit messages of the texts and the implicit messages of space, the concept of “objects,” and the museum as place, medium, and institution. The first point served as a springboard to better explain the collections and the elements they contain. Following mainly Cadamuro (2018) and Haraway (1984-1985), it was possible to contextualise the elements in a decolonial analysis, highlighting the differences between the different types of materials - mainly objects, mummies, hunting trophies and photographs. Space was then given to the commentary on the cover of Pigazzi de Reali’s diary to link it to what is written in the book and to the de Reali collection - a useful and fundamental starting point since de Reali left no written testimony. Looking at the space and the spatial arrangement was useful to better understand how the museum also conveys messages through the way the elements are arranged. In this regard, the interviews proved very useful in understanding the boundaries of the exhibition and the ideals behind it. As far as space is concerned, I largely referred to the source given by Rose (2007), which deals precisely with the interpretation of the performances. Finally, the terminology used was also taken into account, as words are “Trojan horses” (Borghi, 2020) to convey points of view and concepts. Thus, what the museum wrote on the panels was taken into account and an attempt was made to analyse the terms and the messages they convey. The absence of labels in the rooms at the behest of the museum made this part a fundamental one, giving the scarcity of descriptions provided by the museum itself.

Finally, the fourth chapter served to better understand the concept of decolonisation, restitutions and possible changes that the museum could make. The first part is dedicated to decolonisation, its origin as a concept and its importance for a *transformative* museum, taking up different authors and concepts introduced in the previous chapters and presenting some examples of decolonial initiatives. In particular, through the con-

### 4.3 A proposal for the trophy rooms

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cepts of Haraway (2004) and Ko & Ko (2018), I connected decolonisation to the role of non-human animals presented in the first chapter. The second part, dedicated to restitution, was useful to contextualise this practise - and mentality - in museums. Although it takes on different meanings and is contextualised differently, restitution is still generally seen as a decolonial act. Since the Venetian Museum collects objects *stolen* from other populations, it was important to comment on restitution in order to open the debate on its role in the 21st century. To this end, it was also useful to give the example of the MuCiv as one of the Italian museums going through a process of recognition and analysis of Italian colonialism. Finally, the third section was dedicated to the possible changes that could affect the Venetian museum.

Being aware of the limitations of the museum, I have nevertheless tried to propose three measures. The first is to review the quantity and quality of existing inscriptions and to ask what role they play and to what extent they affect the visitor's experience. The second is to engage with the peoples of origin of the materials to implement transitional justice based on decolonisation and go beyond the idea of purely academic knowledge. The third is a kind of exercise to rethink the museum itself, in which I propose to think about the pros and cons of keeping the collections in the spaces where they are located and how to use the past to better understand the present rather than just conserve it.

Knowing that colonialism in museums is not an exclusive problem of the Venetian museum, but extends to the concept of the museum itself and to "scientific knowledge," this paper presents an example of how the issue can be addressed with regard to ethnographic collections in a natural history museum in the current Italian context. The difficulties I encountered were mainly the strong nature/culture binary also found in the guidelines for museums (including those of ICOM itself), the tendency to have European subjects as the main active agents, which also means Western approaches, and the lack of analysis of the colonial past in Italy. I have largely relied on examples from other countries, but they do not reflect the reality in Italy, where there is a greater sensitivity to the subject (as in Germany, the UK, and France) or where subjects are dealt with that are more related to indigenous populations than to extraterritorial colonialism (as in the US). For this reason, it has not always been possible to apply the examples or changes discussed in the research studied to the Italian situation. However, the work of Grechi (2021) is fundamental because it allows contextualising decolonial practices based on the Italian colonial past. The book refers mainly to art and ethnographic museums, so the consideration of authors such as Amselle, Deckha, Gossett, Haraway, Ingold, Ko & Ko and Rose was fundamental to extend the analysis to natural history museums and my case study in particular.

Considering all this, this work wants to offer a vademecum for natural history museums to begin an analysis of their own essence, their history, the context in which they are located and their own role in contemporary societies, questioning what are considered solid, “central” and “universal” aspects that underlie them, in order to be truly able to be a mirror in which societies can reflect and question themselves in a more inclusive and also multispecies, way.

# Appendix A: Interviews

*The interviews were recorded with a microphone, so the quotes are slightly rearranged to better understand the concepts expressed.*

## Interviews from 29th November, 2022

Interviewed: museum guide and educator, taxidermist, head of the anthropology and ethnography section, head of the Miani room.

Riferito al tassidermista: *Volevo chiederle qual è il suo ruolo e cosa comporta il suo lavoro?*

Sono responsabile del laboratorio di preparazione anatomiche e restauro, quindi faccio tutto quello inerente alla conservazione, al restauro delle collezioni storiche e in più quello che riguarda la conservazione delle collezioni attuali quindi tassidermia, conservazione in liquido e in secco dei vari reperti in pelle, scheletrici, organici, incremento delle collezioni: tutto quello che riguarda queste collezioni. Aggiungo che ha anche un ruolo nella preparazione delle attività didattiche, quindi quando abbiamo bisogno di materiale lo prepara.

Riferito al tassidermista: *Mi potrebbe spiegare come vengono applicate le direttive dell'ICOM nella tassidermia nel museo?*

E' un libero professionista che collabora con il museo, quindi gli aggiornamenti sono in capo alla sua azienda. Esatto, poi bisogna ricordare che per mettere le mani in una collezione storica bisogna essere restauratori dei beni culturali abilitati, quindi rientrare nei registri ministeriali - anche per beni naturalistici, paleontologici etc. Per quanto riguarda la tassidermia moderna, bisogna essere un tassidermista abilitato - quindi fare l'esame e avere l'abilitazione. Racchiude due figure diverse: il tassidermista che lavora sui reperti che vengono portati al museo e li prepara - da privati o dai carabinieri -, e la figura del restauratore dei beni culturali, andando a metter mano sia a cose nuove che materiale che fa parte dei beni culturali - come il materiale della collezione de Reali.

Riferito al tassidermista: *Qual è, secondo lei, il ruolo della tassidermia? Perché è importante nei musei di storia naturale in particolare?*

Il tassidermista-restauratore è importante perché è quello che dovrebbe essere in grado di restaurare anche le collezioni storiche - tendenti a deteriorarsi per azioni biologiche, meccaniche etc. In secondo luogo, se vogliamo implementare e creare nuove collezioni e conservare quello che c'è oggi dobbiamo preparare quello che c'è oggi. Quindi la tassidermia è importante perché anche l'attuale potrebbe andare perso. Ovviamente conservare quello che abbiamo ma non uccidere per tassidermizzare. Però non sempre le cose che prepara vanno in esposizione: c'è una tassidermia per ricerca, conservazione e ampliamento delle collezioni, e poi una per l'esposizione. La tassidermizzazione avviene quindi con lo scopo di esporre - e quindi l'animale viene "naturalizzato" - oppure per finalità documentativa e allora non si mantiene più la forma dell'animale in vita ma si conserva come deposito per esempio la pelle stesa (impilabile). Comunque il materiale può essere usato per ricerche genetiche: il materiale in collezione - pelle schiacciata per occupare meno spazio possibile, in posti diversi rispetto a ossa e cranio per esempio - e poi è oggetto di studio - studi genetici, confronti etc.

Riferito al tassidermista: *Come si comporta, secondo lei, il pubblico davanti agli animali tassidermizzati?*

Dipende dal pubblico: bambini o adulti sono diverse. E cambia anche da visita mediata a non mediata. La gente è attratta dall'animale vero. E non una cosa ricostruita in plastica o un modello in generale. Il bambino potrebbe essere attratto ma anche turbato. Siccome sono specie o sottospecie estinte o quasi estinte bisogna far capire al bambino che quello che si faceva cento anni fa, ovvero la caccia all'animale per divertimento - in realtà si fanno anche adesso purtroppo, però così spietatamente no - non si dovrebbe più fare anche perché alcuni di quegli animali sono in CITES quindi non si possono più cacciare. Logico che qualche miliardario che ha i soldi può anche essere autorizzato ad abbattere un animale anche se protetto perché porta soldi e magari con quei soldi proteggono gli altri, è tutto un mondo particolare. Però in teoria la maggior parte delle persone non può più uccidere come si faceva a fine ottocento-primi novecento. Comunque abbiamo voluto mantenere nell'allestimento anche allestimenti storici nelle sale del Miani e del De Reali, per esempio come il de Reali ha utilizzato i trofei per stupire gli ospiti: di là c'è un lampadario proprio per dire che non era un museo, era casa sua che era arredata così. Per noi era importante che ci fosse questa testimonianza perché anche nei musei di storia naturale da una parte non è bello che tutto venga disfatto e ci siano solo allestimenti moderni. Una cosa apprezzata del nostro museo è quella di aver mantenuto anche una parte storica degli allestimenti, di come si sono formate le collezioni dei musei di storia

### 4.3 A proposal for the trophy rooms

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naturale - perché alcune erano collezioni private arrivate al museo. Sennò si rischia di perdere una parte importante della storia della museologia. Inoltre volutamente abbiamo messo le pareti rosse [stanza de Reali] perché sappiamo che è una sala cruenta però volevamo far passare il messaggio che in epoca colonialista c'era l'uomo che era padrone di tutto e andava lì, sparava e ne faceva collezioni. Aveva il sopravvento sulla natura, si sentiva padrone. Aveva una certa dominanza. E invece adesso è cambiato. Qui per esempio facciamo attività con carabinieri (es. guardia forestale) sulla biodiversità e sulle cause che portano all'estinzione di specie e al traffico di animali. Questa stanza dà una sorta di impatto emotivo che però deve essere utilizzato per dare un messaggio educativo e positivo. Perché l'impatto è forte non solo con gli animali ma anche nelle foto, che sono addirittura più cruente. Le tende non c'erano prima: le stanze riprendono il salotto del de Reali per mostrare che erano oggetti di uso quotidiano, che usavano animali come arredamento.

Riferito alla guida e alla responsabile: *Quindi l'obiettivo è stato prendere l'organizzazione del De Reali e riproporla qui in modo che le persone capissero che questo era il vecchio modo di esporre e interpretassero da questo la dominanza dell'uomo della natura?*

Sì. Quanto si sbagliava un tempo, per cercare di non sbagliare più. E comunque è una testimonianza, non si può far finta che non esista. Bisogna fare anche pace con il nostro passato, non possiamo far finta che non sia mai successo e quindi nascondere questo tipo di realtà, e non si può glorificare perché è sbagliato. Quindi comunque è una documentazione. Anche le pareti rosse: lo IUCN ha dei codici per le specie minacciate: verde, giallo e rosso, e rosso è fortemente minacciata di estinzione. Dà l'idea di pericolo. Il rosso non è il sangue degli animali, è un segnale di allarme.

Riferito alla guida: *E questo messaggio viene spiegato durante la guida?*

Ci sono tantissime cose durante tutto il percorso: alcune le colgono, altre no. Il percorso è stato pensato perché si possa passeggiare e cogliere alcuni spunti. Se si fanno le visite guidate e le attività sulla biodiversità sicuramente vengono spiegati. Però il fatto che sia inquietante è una cosa diretta che avviene attraverso il rosso. L'allarme lo hai quando entri qui dentro. Poi è vero, ci sono dei bambini che agiscono con un impatto emotivo molto elevato, mi dispiace però ... [frase in sospenso]. Devo dire anche che a volte loro vedono in televisione o fanno dei giochi molto più cruenti e poi ti dicono "eh madonna [che stanza cruda, impressionabile]" eh ho capito ragazzi ma giocate a certi giochi che ... [frase in sospenso]. Ma c'è anche più sensibilità verso gli animali rispetto a un tempo: a un bambino magari un animale così fa pena e gli dispiace insomma - sì ma per fortuna - e magari si chiede perché è gli è stato fatto questo. Sì diciamo che volutamente abbiamo anche non messo il nome degli animali - abbiamo messo delle schede - perché noi siamo

il museo di storia naturale e ci teniamo a dire che animali sono però non era lo scopo del de Reali dare informazioni scientifiche, era quello di stupire.

*Scopo che viene ripreso dal museo quindi...*

Noi abbiamo fatto la differenza da raccogliere per stupire a raccogliere per studiare, perché c'è una bella differenza: in particolare il De Reali aveva questo senso di stupire perché era un segno di potere, di poter viaggiare, di prestigio. Per quello non abbiamo messo il nome, perché non era una collezione di studio. Questi due pitoni erano due abat-jour per esempio. Anche nella Wunderkammer non ci sono volutamente i nomi sui reperti, perché le Wunderkammer erano fatte per stupire. Era un carattere espositivo prettamente estetico.

Riferito alla guida e alla responsabile: *Il titolo raccogliere per stupire raccogliere per studiare da chi è stato scelto?*

C'è stato uno studio e lo abbiamo scelto noi per spiegare come si è evoluto il collezionismo: dalle prime sale - Miani/De Reali/Ligabue - per poi arrivare alla parte più attuale e scientifica per dare un nome, quindi raccogliere anche più reperti della stessa specie per studiare e conservare. E' l'evoluzione del criterio museografico.

Riferito alla responsabile: *Il museo ha mai preso contatti con le popolazioni da cui provengono i reperti?*

Con Miani è difficile perché una parte di popolazione è stata assorbita da altre - come è avvenuto in tutte le culture. Noi abbiamo questa collezione perché è stata donata da Miani a Venezia, non perché siamo andati noi a raccogliere, non abbiamo assolutamente contatti con le popolazioni. La collezione Ligabue è in parte in comodato. Non capisco lo scopo della domanda.

*Mi chiedevo se c'è mai stato un confronto con le popolazioni da cui sono stati "raccolti", per usare il termine usato per definire le sale, i reperti.*

Non è che sono stati raccolti, sono oggetti frutto di scambio, frutto di raccolta spontanea, molti oggetti del Ligabue sono stati comprati. Quindi non sono oggetti sottratti alle popolazioni.

*Mi chiedevo dato che capitava che questi tipi di raccolta non fossero molto spontanei.* Miani si colloca in Africa prima del colonialismo molto spinto, quindi è una figura anomala nella seconda metà dell'ottocento. Ligabue ha acquistato molti oggetti o sono frutto di campagne di ricerca con tutti i permessi: non c'è stata sottrazione. De Reali sicuramente è andato, ha sparato e si è portato via i reperti: questo volendo potrebbe essere un buon esempio sì. Poi non saprei da chi si potrebbe andare.

*Quindi non c'è mai stato un avvicinamento?*

Ma la motivazione quale sarebbe? Perché noi avremmo dovuto riavvicinarci alle popolazione da cui provengono i materiali?

### 4.3 A proposal for the trophy rooms

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*Mi chiedevo, dato che recentemente è stato fatto da altri musei, se anche qui si fosse mai pensato ad un avvicinamento.*

No, mai. Bisogna poi distinguere i reperti etnografici - tipo il Miani - da quelli naturalistici. Riguardo quelli etnografici c'è un grande movimento che riguarda la decolonizzazione e quanto è stato giusto andare lì a prendere materiali che sono "proprietà di altre culture e di altri luoghi" (suo virgolettato). E su questo c'è un forte dibattito e anche una commissione ministeriale che decide. Noi non avendo materiali - a parte Miani - di tipo etnografico non entriamo tanto in questo dibattito. Anche il punto di vista della lettura verso le collezioni - es. la glorificazione dell'esploratore bianco che andava in paesi selvaggi e li civilizzava - sta cambiando. In realtà al Miani non fregava nulla di civilizzare queste persone. Infatti anche nelle visite cerchiamo di ridimensionare e evitare di dire "l'eroe", "che a scoperto". Come Cristoforo Colombo in America e il fatto che buttano giù le statue, adesso c'è la condanna del colonialismo. Ma ci sta. Questo è un argomento spinoso ma ogni figura va vista per quello che è stata. Non vanno mai estremizzati. Noi abbiamo tutti formazione scientifica, e quindi non c'è nessun esperto di etnografia e non è di nostra competenza. E' fondamentale che le persone che studiano queste cose sappiano che il materiale è qui se voglio occuparsene. E' un argomento che ci tocca poco. Abbiamo un approccio molto molto diverso. Diciamo che non è indispensabile che il curatore non deve necessariamente conoscere i reperti, deve conoscere i materiali e sapere come conservarli. Sarebbe bello. E' solo una questione di costi. Non avendo un approccio antropologico/umanistico/filosofico noi guardiamo i materiali con un'oggettività totalmente diversa.

Riferito alla guida e alla responsabile: *Con i 150 anni del Miani immagino però che ci sia stata una ricerca più "antropologica"?*

Sì, ci siamo appoggiati a specialisti - un antropologo culturale - per raccogliere e ordinare il materiale del Miani fra Venezia, Roma, Vienna etc. Così se qualcuno vorrà in futuro studiare questa collezione non dovrà girare metà Italia e Europa per le informazioni. Anche perché l'idea è quella di creare un polo documentale su Miani a Venezia.

Riferito alla guida: *Il riallestimento 2010-11 ha interessato queste sale?*

Sì, tutto il museo. Tranne la sala del dinosauro che era già stata sistemata nel 2004 mi pare, sistemata insieme all'acquario delle teggùe.

*Come sono state modificate dal riallestimento?*

Gli spazi fisici sono gli stessi. Nella sala Miani abbiamo restaurato gli armadi e messo i fondi nuovi. Miani stesso ha pensato a come esporre i reperti - abbiamo il suo schema, il più antico documento di questo tipo in Europa, e le foto dell'esposizione che era in sala conferenze al primo piano verso il 1880. Abbiamo cercato di ripristinare il più possibile il suo disegno, diviso per etnie. Anche la mummia è stata rimessa vicino ai cocodrilli



come voleva il Miani. Anche questi si chiamavano trofei, giusto per restare in ambito colonialista. Lui raccoglieva già in mente come esporre sia dal punto di vista estetico che della zona di raccolta più o meno. Poi la carta sul pavimento è quella della sua spedizione, e abbiamo segnato il Nilo, le tappe fondamentali e le tribù che si trovano negli armadi. Una sorta di rivisitazione ma mantenendo la sua disposizione. [descrizione di alcuni elementi descrittivi come il diario, le schede, altre mappe. Riprendono alcuni materiali e alcune parti del diario]. Il materiale non è tutto qui. Abbiamo anche aggiunto elementi nuovi (riferendosi alle illustrazioni in alto, sulle pareti, a tema musica). Mantenendo la stanza come la voleva lui e non tradendo la sua volontà di allestimento e appunto una documentazione tangibile e visibile a tutti del livello storico ma modernizzandola con elementi nuovi. [Riprendono alcuni materiali]. Castelli è stato il primo a catalogare la collezione Miani. Siccome nessuno si occupa di queste cose è stato quindi un incarico esterno. Per catalogare e studiare i materiali. [parlano del fatto che la collezione Miani è poco ordinata e classificata. Un africanista olandese è venuto per esempio a vedere i materiali e ha detto che uno in particolare è molto prezioso]. Ma non abbiamo idea di quanti alcuni materiali siano preziosi, quindi diciamo che il materiale è qui ed è patrimonio di tutti per chi vuole studiarlo. Anche perché più si conoscono i materiali più anche io imparo a trattarli e conservarli in modo preciso.

*E quindi anche qui sono descritti i materiali nelle schede?*

No. No perché quando si fa un allestimento si deve decidere quali informazioni dare e non si può rischiare di scrivere troppo: in una vetrina abbiamo scelto di dare alcune descrizioni su un popolazione e poi fare piccoli spot in cui sono evidenziati 3-4 esempi - scelti in base al nostro gusto. Con de Reali abbiamo messo invece le schede con le specie di animali, e nella Wunderkammer schede legenda. Il senso di raccogliere per stupire raccogliere per studiare è che il reperto non ha valore di per sé ma se è correlato dal cartellino scientifico - non tanto il nome ma dove e quando è stato raccolto. L'obiettivo del Miani è stato anche quello di raccogliere per poi tornare in Europa, esporre e prendere fondi per nuove spedizioni.

Riferito alla guida: *Quali sono le cose che notano di più le persone nella sala de Reali?*

Il gorilla era in basso e le persone più anziane se lo ricordano dato che lo toccavano - infatti la parte inferiore era quasi tutto consumata. L'idea che questo museo sia solo per bambini e famiglie è da sfatare. Molte persone tornano, visitandolo più volte. Anche perché a parte Montebelluna e forse Verona è l'unico museo di questo tipo della regione.

Riferito alla guida: *Per il riallestimento del 2010-2011 ho letto che siete andati a vedere vari musei per prendere spunto. C'è stato un museo in particolare che vi ha colpiti*

### 4.3 A proposal for the trophy rooms

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*o che vi è servito?*

No, c'è stato un gruppo di ricerca che ha studiato l'allestimento, ma poi il progetto è stato modificato. Il museo ha, diciamo, una storia travagliata.

Riferito alla responsabile: *Quindi anche voi avete molte difficoltà nel ricostruire la collezione Miani?*

Miani è confusionario e non preciso, per questo anche noi in alcuni casi abbiamo testimonianze contrastanti. Ci sono tante informazioni sbagliate sul Miani perché nei suoi scritti è dispersivo e non lineare, mentre la collezione de Reali per esempio è più ordinata. Possiamo dire che abbiamo iniziato una fase di catalogazione e riordino dei materiali, ma sarà un processo lungo che non sappiamo se e da chi verrà portato a termine.

### Interviews from 11th January, 2023

#### Responsabile sale de Reali

*Qual è il ruolo e cosa comporta?*

Sono conservatore, nello specifico mi occupo di vertebrati, uccelli, botanica e micologia, poi catalogazione e monitoraggio dei reperti e studio della parte storica di collezioni (origine, fonti bibliografiche etc) e divulgazione di questi (laboratori, pubblicazioni, schede).

*Per le sale de Reali in particolare?*

Seguo la collezione che è stata donata dagli eredi nel 1937 ed esposta dal 1939 - dato che c'è vincolo di esposizione per volere delle eredi - rispettando l'esibizione della villa di Dosson. Durante la chiusura (1996-2010) si sono sistemati e restaurati i reperti.

*C'è una visione etnografica alla base? E se sì, quale?*

Si è cercato di mostrare l'evoluzione: Miani era spinto da curiosità e spirito di esplorazione dell'Africa, riportando descrizioni obiettive dei suoi viaggi. De Reali invece era interessato alla caccia grossa per dimostrare il suo status symbol attraverso la villa di Dosson: la differenza è visibile anche nella disposizione delle sale, che in qualche modo devono scioccare e colpire perché oggi, ma anche prima, non faremmo mai un'esposizione di questo tipo, è una operazione di documentazione di un periodo storico per l'aspetto anche di conservazione di alcune specie. Quindi suscitare un impatto per interrogarsi sul senso di un'operazione che un tempo veniva condotta e che oggi non viene tollerata.

*Cosa significa per lei raccogliere per stupire, raccogliere per studiare?*

Nel nostro caso di personale di museo ha l'intento di raccontare l'evoluzione del collezionismo scientifico: dal 1500 in poi si voleva stupire il pubblico per mostrare una mole di materiali che avevano un impatto e una certa estetica, anche rappresentare mondi lontani.

*Quindi l'ordine delle sale è il contrario di quello cronologico e del titolo?*

La Wunderkammer una chiusa diciamo, il passaggio dagli esploratori alla museologia moderna anche se vengono prima delle Wunderkammern perché rappresentano il collezionismo legato al nostro territorio veneziano (Miani, de Reali e Ligabue). La Wunderkammer è quindi l'ultima perché serve per passare poi alla sala di museologia - quando inizia la catalogazione. Quindi prima si raccoglieva senza intendo scientifico, poi è arrivato il metodo scientifico e quindi altri esploratori nella sala lunga. Miani, de Reali e Ligabue sono in ordine cronologico per spiegare la storia delle collezioni legate all'ambito veneziano, la Wunderkammer è il passaggio rispetto alla sezione "studiare". Teniamo conto anche della logistica: questo è un museo in uno stabile vecchio a Venezia quindi dobbiamo mantenere gli spazi esistenti, e la stanza che ospita Miani è quella che ospita la collezione da quando è al secondo piano. E quando ci sono lotti interi, come la de Reali, vincolate all'esposizione dobbiamo esporre.

*E' obbligatorio esporre tutti gli elementi nel caso de Reali?*

Dei circa 300 oggetti, ora non sono esposti solo una decina di uccelli che sono meno legati all'aspetto etnografico della collezione e alla vecchia collezione in generale. Anche la dimensione dei reperti influenza cosa esporre e cosa no (es. una balena da gestire è più difficile di un uccello).

*Le fotografie nelle sale de Reali come sono state scelte e gestite?*

Non sempre sono collegate ai reperti che vi sono sopra, per esempio c'è una foto con il leone ucciso e sopra la pelle del leone ma non è sempre così. Poi de Reali aveva un'idea colonialista e nel diario del Congo della moglie emerge questo disprezzo per le popolazioni locali (considerate inferiori), mentre per esempio in Miani c'è uno "stacco" perché descrive in modo oggettivo le popolazioni, non c'era una condanna.

*Ci sono state lamentele da parte del pubblico per le sale de Reali?*

Qualcosa percepiamo dal libro dei visitatori, in cui alcuni lamentano che vengano esposti i trofei di caccia e spesso erano genitori di bambini che si sono impressionati. Ma quando c'è una visita mediata si spiega il perché e capisco che mediato da una guida è più facile capire il messaggio che vogliamo veicolare: è una collezione storica e una testimonianza che serve per sensibilizzare. Alcune lamentele sono sulla luce bassa e la mancanza di didascalie che però riguarda di più la progettazione per cui si è scelto di non accompagnare tutti i reperti con spiegazioni perché è stato visto che con una alta quantità di testo il pubblico è annoiato e passa dritto, e quindi le scelte sono un modo per incuriosire e approfondire in altra maniera. Poi ci sono le schede di sala che illustrano cosa è esposto e degli approfondimenti - nel caso de Reali su specie a rischio.

*Sono mai stati fatti dei sondaggi per capire se l'esposizione è apprezzata e capita dai*

### 4.3 A proposal for the trophy rooms

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*visitatori?*

Analisi quantitativa no, abbiamo fatto una lettura parzialmente critica sulle note dei visitatori in occasione di un convegno nel 2013 ma la maggior parte apprezza l'allestimento. Silvia Casini aveva somministrato al pubblico dei questionari. L'allestimento stesso del 2010/2011 è stato un grosso sforzo anche economico, che molti colleghi vedevano come un unicum nel panorama nazionale. Non è comunque contemplato in questo momento un riallestimento, tranne che per una parte dedicata alla laguna che quando abbiamo progettato il museo era compresa ma che poi per motivi economici non si è realizzata.

*Cosa vorrebbe arrivasse di più del suo lavoro?*

Un po' il perché uno fa questo lavoro: dal punto di vista di chi lo fa, la passione e la costanza. L'Italia non è un paese che promuove molto il lavoro naturalistico e scientifico perché la nostra cultura viene ancora vista come umanistica o legata al mondo dell'arte. Poi anche la voglia di conservare, preservare e far conoscere il patrimonio formato da gente molto appassionata e farla conoscere al pubblico e spiegare che conserviamo perché è la storia del nostro territorio e serve poi per la gestione del territorio stesso, perché mostrano come si è modificato nel tempo. Anche quindi il senso di responsabilità verso un patrimonio che va preservato e reso pubblico.

#### **Direttore del museo**

*In cosa consiste il suo lavoro di direttore di museo?*

Oltre alla parte burocratica legata al personale mi occupo della gestione scientifica, quindi dalla conservazione delle collezioni alla valorizzazione, nonché dello studio, della divulgazione e della ricerca. C'è anche una parte di ricerca di campioni in ambiente quindi gestire anche questo ambito.

*Per il riallestimento del 2010-2011 che musei avete preso in considerazione?*

Prima c'è stata una raccolta bibliografica e revisione di tutto quello che è stato fatto di buono, ovviamente cercando le eccellenze o gli allestimenti più innovativi. Poi vari musei, per quanto vecchi o superati, hanno sempre qualcosa di interessante da vedere. Allora eravamo coordinati dal direttore della Fondazione e abbiamo fatto un tour dell'Europa per fare un'esperienza di gruppo. Rispetto ai vari musei però noi dovevamo ricordare che il nostro era un palazzo storico con una serie di limitazione: non si possono aprire finestre e buttare giù muri, quindi non ha un ampio spazio di manovra. In terra ferma, un museo del genere si fa in spazi doppi.

*Non è mai stato pensato di spostarlo dati questi limiti?*

Sì, è stato pensato ma per fortuna non è stato fatto perché il museo è nato qui, ha una sua storia. Poi per esempio la stanza Miani è tutelata dalla Società Geografica Italiana

proprio perché ormai è un'installazione storica ed era impensabile spostarla anche solo all'interno del museo. Manca comunque ancora il pezzo di museo dedicato alla laguna nella mezzana, e infatti ora il percorso non è quello immaginato all'inizio. Il museo è apprezzato moltissimo lo stesso, ma è monco senza questa parte, che è una delle due cose che ci vengono obbiettate - insieme alla mancanza del testo in inglese.

*E come mai non c'è il testo in inglese?*

Non c'è perché abbiamo scelto - scelta che oggi non so se rifaremmo - di non metterlo perché avrebbe raddoppiato la lunghezza del testo: ormai c'è una bibliografia internazionale infinita che dimostra come da un punto di vista psicologico e di approccio alle didascalie da distante, indipendentemente dalla lingua, oltre un certo numero di parole ci sia un effetto respingente verso il visitatore. Oggi per evitare di respingere abbiamo mantenuto una stratificazione di comunicazione a più livelli, da più diretto (primo livello), a quello scritto un pò più in piccolo (secondo livello), a delle schede di approfondimento (terzo livello) etc. Poi nelle sale di una certa dimensione, come quella di Miani, si perde un pò il contenitore delle schede o alcuni elementi non sono trovati da tutti. Ma comunque non tutti si fermano per lo stesso tempo nei vari posti.

*Quindi quello che c'è ora è il massimo possibile?*

Sì, quello che è stato valutato grazie alla commissione dell'ANMS [Ass. Naz. Musei Scientifici]. Poi il museo è stato un caso di studio per l'ANMS e abbiamo preso premi internazionali per la comunicazione. Oggi per la lingua (inglese, francese e in futuro forse giapponese) viene usata l'audio pen a uso semplificato e intuitivo perché abbiamo anche nonni che vengono con i nipotini e quindi non per forza tutto il pubblico è in grado di usare allo stesso modo la tecnologia. E per nostra scelta non utilizziamo nulla che preveda l'uso dello smartphone perché preferiremmo molto che durante la visita rimanesse nelle tasche per riuscire a seguire e apprezzare il racconto che abbiamo preparato. Questa scelta si nota nelle sale de Reali, dove un visitatore veloce, superficiale e disattento può non capire con quale distacco e quale senso della collocazione storica il museo rappresenta quel tipo di esposizione. Noi l'abbiamo esaltata, dal colore di fondo alle luci, per far sentire il visitatore infastidito da quel tipo di collocazione, che deve essere percepito come sbagliato.

*Quindi una persona dovrebbe arrivarci da sé?*

La stratificazione è stata fatta volutamente su più livelli per permettere una fruizione non selettiva alla capacità (es. ipovedenti) o al bagaglio culturale delle persone.

*Quanto costa l'audio pen?*

3,50€. Il problema di questo strumento è a livello commerciale, perché si è deciso di fornirla a parte e non con il biglietto e questo è già un handicap. Il prezzo non è elevato ma

### 4.3 A proposal for the trophy rooms

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l'operatore che vende l'audio pen è lo stesso che vende il biglietto e dunque la biglietteria dovrebbe vendere il biglietto, proporre l'audio pen, vendere l'audio pen e spiegarne il funzionamento, il che in caso di affollamento è umanamente impensabile quindi funziona bene solo quando c'è poca gente. Si dovrebbe invece dare l'incentivo alle persone di comprare l'audio pen. Questo è un limite all'utilizzo, per cui molti visitatori non sanno che c'è - anche se ci sono i cartelli ma, come dicevamo prima, siccome ci sono tanti cartelli la gente non li legge.

*E più persone possono ascoltarla contemporaneamente?*

Noi diamo mappa (con i codici per l'audio pen) e quindi più persone riescono. Per il COVID abbiamo optato per togliere le cuffie perché andavano sanificate ogni volta e quindi abbiamo tenuto un volume che permetta a un gruppo famiglia di ascoltare senza disturbare gli altri visitatori.

*Tornando alle collezioni, cosa significa per le Raccogliere per stupire raccogliere per studiare?*

Il titolo è stata una geniale intuizione dell'ex direttore se non sbaglio, perché scegliere i titoli è una cosa da creativi ma spesso i creativi offrono titoli scientificamente terribili. Per me è il passaggio dalla pre-Wunderkammern, e quindi anche dai primi approcci che i paleontologi ci mostrano: come le conchiglie che venivano raccolti dall'uomo preistorico per farci collane o monili perché erano oggetti bellissimi che uno voleva portare con sé e come moneta di scambio, tanto che poi diventavano doni preziosi da collezionare in gabinetti e mobiletti di mirabilia per stupire. La seconda parte invece è la nascita dei musei scientifici dalla Wunderkammer al salone della museologia scientifica - con Linneo, tassonomia, e rivoluzione francese che pongono finalmente le basi di studiare il creato, cosa che era stata tentata in epoca greca ma si è potuto organizzare solo grazie alla convergenza di tassonomia e nomenclatura binomiale.

*Sul sito le sale Miani e de Reali sono considerate etnografiche, ma il museo tecnicamente è di scienze naturali. Che linee guida ICOM seguite?*

Nessuno di noi ha una formazione di quel tipo e quindi per noi è stata un'avventura. Le linee guida per fortuna non sono leggi divine, e noi ci siamo trovati in una situazione in cui la sala Miani andava restaurata e messa in sicurezza - sia la sala che la collezione (pellicole sui vetri fatti a Murano, i fondi di legno sono stati sostituiti con alluminio effetto legno etc, la mappa è stata un'idea per vestire e comunicare che Miani era un esploratore) - mantenendo l'allestimento di Miani.

*Quindi si può dire che avete scelto di non riallestire?*

Nella sala Ligabue è stato ricostruito il deserto per valorizzare il dinosauro. Con de Reali forse potevamo scegliere, ma con Miani sarebbe stato un problema perché è sotto la SGI

dato che lo stesso allestimento è diventato un bene culturale. Su quella struttura con gli armadi riceviamo complimenti dai colleghi, perché è stato tutelato un allestimento storico mentre gli altri di solito vengono modificati o buttati, quindi per loro questo è un museo dei musei di storia naturale. Ogni anno che passa sembra una scelta molto lungimirante. Quella de Reali è venuta di conseguenza, mantenendo com'era casa sua. L'unico dubbio che mi viene è che forse non siamo riusciti a comunicare in modo così forte che quell'allestimento è la ricostruzione di casa de Reali - abbiamo aggiunto le tende e il lampadario che ci siamo fatti dare da palazzo ducale. Forse potevamo osare e mettere anche le lampadine in bocca ai due pitoni e un telefono d'epoca sullo sgabello fatto con la tibia. Tutto si può fare, ci stiamo anche pensando in effetti.

*Parlando di Miani, qual è il rapporto fra museo e paesi di origine dei reperti?*

Problemi con i paesi d'origine noi non ne abbiamo, ma è un problema assolutamente all'ordine del giorno. Non ne abbiamo perché penso la collezione non fosse ancora molto conosciuta. In più è un percorso su più territori. Spero, penso, conto che verrà un giorno in cui i governi di quei territori possono avere interessi a venire a studiare reperti e annotazioni che rappresentano quei luoghi.

*Quindi non avete mai contattato di vostra iniziativa i paesi?*

Non lo fa nemmeno il Pigorini perché non c'è il tempo, però loro lo hanno il problema. Noi per fortuna questi problemi non li abbiamo, ma non abbiamo né il tempo né le competenze per metterci noi in fase propositiva e contattare. Noi riteniamo molto importante il lavoro che abbiamo fatto, perché deve essere questo il canale che deve essere utilizzato: quando questa cosa è conosciuta a livello scientifico internazionale è molto più facile che chi si occupa della propria tradizione e della propria storia faccia una banale ricerca su internet e trovi informazioni.

*Nel caso in cui vi chiedessero di restituire, cosa farebbe?*

Domanda difficile. Sicuramente la disponibilità c'è sempre, e anche in situazioni in cui non si può fare nel caso si presta o si lasciano copie o altre forme di collaborazione. Dipende da una quantità enorme di variabili. Per altro, noi gestiamo un patrimonio che non è nostro ma è dell'amministrazione comunale, noi in caso possiamo solo dare un parere scientifico. Io credo che vada rispettata sicuramente la sensibilità e le legittime aspirazioni culturali di chi ha difficoltà di trovare reperti e testimonianze nel proprio paese perché si trovano in diaspora in giro per il mondo. Personalmente penso che chi abbia questi oggetti abbia il dovere morale quantomeno di restituire ciò che questi oggetti possono restituire dal punto di vista culturale alle popolazioni originarie.

*Quindi se domani le dicessero di restituire la collezione Miani?*

In questo caso però non sarebbe la restituzione ma lo smembramento della collezione,

### 4.3 A proposal for the trophy rooms

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e già così si rischia che collezione che ha già un suo significato nel suo insieme venga sparpagliata e si deve quindi capire che significato può avere nel comune o paese X avere pochi elementi come 3 corni. Quindi si deve capire se ha un significato fare un'azione di questo tipo: è una valutazione che va fatta caso per caso su cosa è oggettivamente rimasto nel luogo di origine. L'isola di pasqua per esempio rinvoca indietro i moai ma se ne hanno già che senso ha che riprendi anche l'unico che hai fuori? Invece uno che non ha più niente perché gli oggetti sono stati sparsi chiaramente è una situazione completamente diversa. Se fossi il direttore di un museo che non ha elementi per raccontare una parte importante della sua storia chiederei a chi li ha di darmi gli oggetti che mi sono necessari a costruire una narrazione che io ho da fare (quindi avendo già un'idea), non sono gli oggetti di per sé che voglio indietro ma i reperti funzionali a un racconto. Se un oggetto ha una funzione ed è rimasto solo quello sarebbe difficile non restituire, e in caso faccio una copia per me e restituisco l'originale lì dove viene valorizzato molto di più rispetto che all'interno di questo racconto.

*Oltre al questionario, ci sono altre analisi sui visitatori?*

Sì, tutti gli anni. Una tesi di dottorato fatta qui al museo è stata poi usata soprattutto per modificare i tesi poco leggibili per dimensione o contrasto, aggiungere oggetti iconici da toccare per i visitatori non o ipo vedenti (es cranio nella sala Miani) e quindi è stata molto utile non solo per l'approccio usato ma anche per un riscontro pratico. Poi leggo sempre i guest book che hanno annotazioni interessanti. Una volta avevamo un ufficio che faceva questionari di gradimento ma è stato chiuso e non è più stato sostituito, non dipende da noi ma dalla fondazione. Poi durante le attività didattiche sottopongono un questionario per i docenti per dare feedback sulle attività.

*Qual è la sua idea di museo di storia naturale nel 2023?*

C'è la definizione ICOM, ma in generale un moderno museo di storia naturale deve innanzitutto essere un museo nel territorio e legato al territorio - rappresentando il territorio, facendo ricerca sul territorio, facendo rete e lavorare quindi con università, associazioni etc. Il museo deve lavorare per il benessere delle persone, quindi anche minori non accompagnati, migranti, portatori di handicap, che sono cose complicate da fare perché la legge giustamente è molto attenta. Di conseguenza c'è anche un continuo bisogno di formazione e di continuo ricambio generazionale. In Italia questo è un tabù, ed è un problema generale. Quindi un museo che vuole fare tutto questo deve comunicare al territorio la necessità e l'importanza che queste cose hanno nella società perché i musei hanno funzione per i cittadini e per il territorio, non per i turisti o come leva economica (es. museo di Cesenatico che è nato dall'esigenza delle persone).



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