

Sessione

Museologia e Comunicazione

comunicazioni orali

The museum anthropological collections within the context of the decolonization practice: challenges and perspectives.

Maria Giovanna Belcastro¹

¹ *Università di Bologna*

The anthropological collections housed in many Italian museums encompass a wide range of assets. In addition to human skeletons, these collections are enriched by a large variety of items (anthropometric instruments, ornaments, objects for daily or sacred use, ethnographic materials of various kinds, etc.). Among these, plaster face casts represent particularly unique objects, positioned midway between human remains and artifacts.

Originally produced to illustrate so-called racial differences, most of these casts were made from living individuals during scientific and colonial expeditions. They were not merely trophies, but rather legitimate tools for research and education, capable of conveying human features that could not be fully captured through photographs or measurement tables. As such, they played a relevant role in the development of Physical Anthropology as an independent scientific discipline between the mid-nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.

A considerable number of plaster casts are still held in institutions across Europe, the United States, and Africa. In particular, many Italian scientific museums preserve these assets. The Anthropological Collections of the University of Bologna, for instance, include hundreds of plaster face casts. Among them, the Lidio Cipriani (1892–1962) collection consists of 95 replicas of such casts, realized during the expeditions in Africa and in Asia between 1927 and 1935.

Many of us anthropologists are actively involved in the management, research, and education on the museum collections, which we have inherited from the founders of the discipline. This legacy now presents new challenges regarding the destin and future of this critical and vulnerable heritage, for which we bear great responsibility.

Within this context, the Horizon Europe project COLUMN (Colonial Legacies of Universities: Materialities and New Collaborations) (2025–2029) aims to thoroughly investigate the meanings and future perspectives of these collections, with a particular focus on the plaster face casts housed at the University of Bologna. This is a collaborative project led by Utrecht University, involving other European institutions as well as universities in the Global South (South Africa and Mexico). Here, we present the project's design and initial findings, reflecting on the current role of scientific anthropological museums facing with these new and complex challenges.

The Museum of Sardinian Anthropology and Ethnography and the Museum of Zoology at the University of Cagliari

Antonello Mulas¹, Rita Cannas¹, Mauro Argiolas¹, Federica Deidda Canelles¹, Marco Melis², Valeria Succa¹, Vitale Sparacello¹, Elisabetta Marini¹

¹ *Università di Cagliari - Dipartimento di Scienze della Vita e dell'Ambiente*

² *Università di Cagliari - Dipartimento di Scienze Biomediche*

The Museum of Sardinian Anthropology and Ethnography and the Museum of Zoology, both part of the Interdepartmental Centre for Museums, Collections and Historical Archives at the University of Cagliari, are engaged in activities in the fields of conservation, education, and science communication. While maintaining their distinct disciplinary focuses, the two museums collaborate closely to promote the integration of cultural and natural heritage, and to enhance public engagement and interdisciplinary teaching.

The Museum of Zoology (https://web.unica.it/unica/it/museo_zoologia.page) was founded in the very early 1800s at the behest of the Viceroy of Sardinia, Carlo Felice. Although the main nucleus was established during the 19th century, the acquisition of new specimens has continued up to the present day, so that many of the collections cover a time range of 200 years. The collections now comprise over 10000 specimens of the main animal types, many of them of high scientific, conservation and educational interest. Sardinian fauna is particularly represented, but species from all around the world are present. Among vertebrates, the ornithological and ichthyological parts are the most numerous, with about 2000 specimens. Arthropods, mainly Insects and Arachnids comprise approximatively 7000 specimens. The osteological collection ranges from the few centimeters of the mole skeleton to the over 15 meters of that of the finwhale. Since their inception, the collections have been utilized in research and education, and they continue to have a significant influence on our comprehension of animal biodiversity.

The Museum of Sardinian Anthropology and Ethnography (MUSAE; <https://www.unica.it/unica/page/it/musae>) was founded in 1953 with the aim of promoting knowledge of the prehistory and history of the Sardinian population through the study of human skeletal remains and evidence of recent cultural traditions. The museum houses and partially exhibits a wide range of materials, including over 10,000 human skeletal remains from prehistoric to modern times, cranial casts illustrating hominid evolution, two mummies, historic anatomical preparations from the last century, and objects from traditional agro-pastoral daily life, including furnishings, tools, musical instruments, clothing, and ex-votos. It also has a collection of more than 20,000 slides and videos. A large sample of skulls has been reconstructed in 3D and will be made freely available for research purposes.

Studying the Italian tardigrade biodiversity through the Citizen science project “Tardigrades go to school!”

Ginaluigi Prato¹, Ilaria Giovannini², Lorena Rebecchi², Roberto Guidetti², Sara Brandoli³, Tiziana Altiero²

¹ *UNIMORE - DISTEM*

² *UNIMORE*

³ *UNIMORE - UNIVE*

Italy is a biodiversity hotspot in Europe, rich in species, endemic organisms, and diverse biogeographical regions—with tardigrades contributing to this richness. The knowledge of Italian terrestrial tardigrade biodiversity remains incomplete, as many regions are almost unexplored. Due to their distinctive appearance and remarkable stress resistance, tardigrades have captured public interest, especially in younger generations. The Citizen Science project ‘Tardigrades go to school!’ engages students in mapping the distribution of moss-dwelling tardigrades, aiming to develop awareness of biodiversity and a sense of responsibility for its conservation.

Students are introduced to tardigrades and their ecological importance through meetings and educational materials. During hands-on activities at school, they collect moss samples from the garden, extract and observe tardigrades using everyday tools. School trips provide further opportunities to collect mosses, complete data sheets, search for tardigrades, and send samples to tardigrade specialists for faunistic analysis using integrative approach.

Participating classes receive certificates, and findings are shared via reports, public meetings, and the EvoZooLab website. Samples collected from primary and secondary schools in Northern Italy have already revealed a high degree of biodiversity, including rare and new tardigrade species. The project is now expanding to involve more schools throughout Italy, enabling a comprehensive study of tardigrade biodiversity and distribution, as well as monitoring their conservation status. It fosters citizen participation in scientific research and promotes environmental awareness and interest in tardigrades among students.

“Project funded under NRRP, Mission 4 Component 2 Investment 1.4 funded by NextGenerationEU; Project code CN_00000033, Project title NBFC”

Imaginary creatures in the classroom: speculative biology as didactic tool

Alessandro Allievi¹, Giulio Petroni¹

¹ *Università di Pisa*

Speculative biology is a discipline between art and science, proposing to make physiologically and evolutionarily plausible descriptions of imaginary organisms. Having existed for decades as a niche pastime, it is now increasingly featured in popular entertainment; its subdiscipline concerned with the possibility of life on other planets, known as exobiology or astrobiology, is increasingly treated as a scientific branch worth of study. Since speculative biology requires a solid grasp of the principles of evolutionary biology, but also engages the imagination and creativity of the practitioner, its use as didactic tool suggests itself. Some previous efforts have already taken place, such as asking students to build phylogenies of imaginary organisms or construct fictional but plausible biospheres. We propose a similar exercise in which zoology students (bachelor course in Natural Sciences) are asked to analyse and deconstruct creatures from folklore and mythology, pointing out biologically implausible traits, and then redesign them with a plausible physiology and place them in a plausible evolutionary and ecological context. We present preliminary results of such designs, as well as considerations about the potential of this sort of exercise in helping the students engage critically with the biological principles learned in the classroom, without resorting to rote memorization.