

CHRONICLES FROM A CLOSED MUSEUM

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Abstract

This contribution addresses the strategies of public engagement, heritage reinterpretation, and knowledge co-production recently implemented by the MAET - Museum of Anthropology and Ethnography of the University of Turin. As with many Western museums founded in 19th and 20th centuries, it must contend with a legacy tied to the racist and colonial ideologies of its past. Its ethnographic collections, particularly those from non-European contexts, highlight critical challenges such as its colonial history, 'sensitive heritage' and the issue of 'archival silence'. The MAET has recently started a process of reassessing its non-European collections in an effort to deconstruct its institutional history. This paper will provide an analysis of the museum's efforts to engage local communities – students, citizens, and migrants – through a decolonial lens, focusing on projects like Around the World in 90 Minutes – an educational workshop for primary school students – and Voices from the Forgotten Collections – conceived to promote the exhibition Africa. The forgotten collections (Royal Museum of Turin, 27th October 2023 – 25th February 2024). Although small in scale, these activities prepare for the museum's future reopening and foster participatory museology.

Keywords: Museums; Ethnographic collections; Colonial heritage; Archival silence; Decolonisation; Public Engagement.

Museums have long been revered as repositories of human creativity, where the objects of our collective past are carefully preserved and presented for public contemplation. However, beyond mere repositories, museums serve as dynamic spaces that foster a deep sense of rootedness and response-ability within individuals and communities. Far from being stagnant warehouses of historical artefacts, museums can be vibrant hubs where cultural heritage, social consciousness, and environmental stewardship converge. They play a pivotal role in society as places in which history, culture, and contemporary issues intersect, and by gathering communities together they can offer spaces for people to share experiences and exchange knowledge and practices. This mission has now become central in the museum discourse involving anthropological institutions, pledged to valorise

the products of human material cultures and to engage with the subjects who produced them.

In today's globalised societies, characterised by a marked extent of superdiversity (Vertovec, 2007) in which (individual and collective) subjectivities with different backgrounds co-exist within shared territories, anthropological museums hold a critical role in acknowledging and representing cultural diversity. By incorporating multiple stories, traditions, and contributions into their narratives, these institutions not only promote a more inclusive understanding of cultural heritage but also create 'contact zones' (Clifford, 1997) where intercultural dialogue and social integration can be promoted (Amselle, 2016). Therefore, rather than 'heterotopias' (Foucault & Miskowiec, 1986) that exhibit 'otherness', they aspire to become places of cultural exchange, through public engagement activities aimed at involving the public (Kreps, 2020: 11). Collaboration – both as co- production of knowledge and public involvement – has now become the cornerstone of museum anthropology (Isaac 2015), as 'originating or 'source people (Peers and Brown 2003) are increasingly involved as original producers of the exhibited collections (Ames, 1990: 161).

In this regard, the case of the Museum of Anthropology and Ethnography of the University of Turin (MAET) is significant to reflect on what strategies a museum can implement to take root in its territory, despite its inaccessibility to the public. In fact, as a closed museum the MAET also represents an example of a resilient museum, one still able to implement strategies to enhance and communicate its heritage.

The MAET: a delayed museum

Closed to the public since 1984, the MAET preserves numerous collections of different origins and provenances. It was founded in 1926 by the psychiatrist and anthropologist Giovanni Marro on the basis of an original nucleus of mummies, osteological and archaeological finds collected during his participation in the Italian Archaeological Mission in Egypt (1913-1914). It was here that Marro came into contact with Ernesto Schiaparelli, director of the archaeological mission and of the Egyptian Museum of Turin, who turned out to be a central figure for the establishment of the MAET's first collections. In fact, both the nucleus of mummies and human remains and the first ethnographic collections – from Africa, Asia, Latin America and Oceania – became part of the Museum thanks to Schiaparelli's intercession. Therefore, many of the artefacts stored at the MAET relate its history with that of other local institutions: first of all, the Egyptian Museum of Turin which shares with the MAET some Egyptological and anthropological collections acquired concomitantly in the same archaeological sites of Assiut and Gebelein; and secondly, the Museum of Antiquities of Turin – managed by Schiaparelli as superintendent of the

collections of antiquities – from which some of the oldest ethnographic collections arrived. Hence, although Marro founded the Museum, the figure of Schiaparelli could be considered even more relevant regarding the history of collections, since he was nearly always involved in donations and exchange practices between the MAET and the Museum of Antiquities. Nevertheless, to understand the MAET's current inaccessibility condition, the figure of Giovanni Marro cannot be overlooked.

Born in Limone Piemonte on 29th May, 1875, Marro's family moved to Turin in 1882, where he went on to graduate in Medicine and Surgery in 1900. Following his father's careerⁱⁱ, he dedicated himself to psychiatry and physical anthropology supporting positivist and racist theories (Marro, 1940b). This type of education, combined with the cultural fervour of the late nineteenth century, made Marro an eclectic and controversial figure. He soon joined the National Fascist Party (PNF), and thanks to his political orientation he established his academic position, gaining the chair of Anthropology for the Natural Sciences in 1923, and founding the Institute and the Museum of Anthropology in 1926 (Marro, 1940a; Mangiapane & Grasso, 2019a; Grasso & Mangiapane, 2022).

Marro's Museumⁱⁱⁱ was set up according to an evolutionary epistemology that looked at the material culture from 'elsewhere' as means to document the development of human societies. The ethnographic collections assembled under his direction were not the consequence of particular interests or aimed collecting strategies, but the result of donations from colleagues and acquaintances; however, they were nevertheless used as part of an attempt to apply an avowedly evolutionary approach to human diversity (Grasso, 2020). The research carried out by the Institute and the Museum of Anthropology therefore never delved into the historical and cultural contexts of the artefacts, but focused on the classificatory aspects of mankind that nourished the racist beliefs of Marro, who even signed the Manifesto of Race in 1938 (Marro, 1939; Grasso & Mangiapane, 2022)^{iv}. In light of this orientation, it should not be surprising that non-European objects, as well as archaeological finds and artefacts from mental hospitals – the three main collections of the MAET – were considered as 'stuff' produced by 'primitives, savages and madmen' (Stocking, 1991; Grasso 2020). This approach had already been debated and overcome in other European institutions (Ames, 1992; Amselle, 2017; Karp & Lavine, 1991; Kreps, 2020; Stocking, 1985), but Italian museology lagged behind. In fact, considering its history, the MAET went through the typical phases of development of anthropological museums (Ames, 1992; Bouquet, 2012; Stocking, 1985; Sturtevant, 1969) but with a staggered chronology: although the Museum was founded in 1926, Marro gave it a nineteenth-century setting that other institutions had already overcome. This approach triggered a domino effect on museum practices that led to an effective 'rediscovery' of ethnographic heritage only in recent decades.

After Marro's death (1952), the scientific directors who managed the Museum did not bring any innovation to the practices of the collections' management and communication. From the 1950s to the early 1980s, the history of the Museum was rather characterised by a long period of silence embraced to hide the inconvenient past of its founder (Mangiapane & Grasso, 2019b; Grasso & Mangiapane, 2022). No publication or public event made mention of Marro's private life and political orientation – considered uncomfortable topics to deal with – and no critical reflection on previous and contemporary museum practices was carried out. Besides the new layout conceived by the director Brunetto Chiarelli in 1962 – which still revolved around nineteenth-century themes such as evolutionism and the natural history of mankind (Grasso, 2020) – the Museum entered a stalemate phase. There was no research activity to contextualise or explore the ethnographic collections and their biographies (Kopytoff, 1986), and non-European material culture continued to be overlooked or used as corollary to display outmoded ideas about human evolution.

Since the 1980s, the European debate initiated by the International Movement for a New Museology (MINOM, 1985) proposed a museum reform to get over the 'old museology' that was 'too much about museum methods, and too little about the purposes of museums' (Vergo, 1989: 3). Nevertheless, the MAET remained unaltered until it was forced to close in 1984, due to the stringent laws on public spaces safety. The Cinema Statuto fire, which took place in Turin in February 1983, imposed more restrictive regulations regarding the safety of public spaces, and in accordance with the new legal provisions, the MAET rooms – then located in the Palazzo dell'Ospedale di San Giovanni Battista – were declared unusable. Since then, the long period of silence that overshadowed the problematic debut of the Museum during the fascist period also assumed a material dimension, because the doors that gave access to the collections were locked and the objects placed in storage. Thus, the methodological delay started by Marro was further expanded, given that collections – especially the ethnographic ones – continued to be neglected.

The MAET of the Future: Realignment Strategies

The locked doors of the MAET – celebrating their 40th anniversary this year – certainly symbolise a physical border that divides the Museum from the society of which it is part (Simon, 2016), but also represent an opportunity for reaction and reform that can be implemented to lift from the condition of inaccessibility. If the closure seems to have little chance of being resolved soon, the museum has the potential to reach out to its target audience and citizens by using an adverse situation to its advantage.

In the last decade, the MAET developed strategies to finally 'open its doors' and build new and deep connections with people who potentially could self-identify with its heritage (Grasso & Mangiapane, 2021). When in 2017 the directorship passed to a cultural anthropologist – the first after a series of physical anthropologists – the MAET inaugurated a new chapter of its life. In this phase, marked by a further move of the collections to the Palazzo degli Istituti Anatomici of the University of Turin, the Museum has faced (and continues to face) two main challenges: the problematic nature of its cultural heritage and the closure to the public.

As for the first issue, the MAET stores collections that can be recognised as 'sensitive' (Schorch, 2020: 2) and 'dissonant' (Tunbridge & Ashworth, 1995) due to the origins and evocative power of objects, sometimes related to memories and conflicting narratives of past traumas, violence or other negative historical events. In fact, though the Museum has never been explicitly colonial, the way of collecting some artefacts – such as the anthropological finds and photographic collections from Egypt or the objects from colonial contest in Africa – was typically colonialist (Mangiapane & Pecci, 2019: 6). For this reason, the MAET began to reflect on its past and heritage in order to deconstruct the history of collections from a 'decolonial' viewpoint. Christina Kreps defines the decolonization of museum practice as:

a process of acknowledging the historical, colonial contingencies under which collections were acquired; revealing Eurocentric ideologies and biases in the Western museum concept, discourse and practice; acknowledging and including diverse voices and multiple perspectives; and transforming museums through sustained critical analysis and concrete actions (Kreps, 2011: 72).

In this regard, the process by which the MAET intends to be more inclusive, adopting multiple voices and perspectives, required a prior work of reconstruction and contextualisation of its history and practices, as well as their deconstruction in decolonial terms. This process was initiated with the reordering, study and cataloguing campaigns of both the material heritage and photographic collections and the historical archive. The latter has assumed a fundamental role, not so much in providing useful information about museum's history and heritage, but in revealing its gaps, omissions and biases. From the founder's death until the resumption of research activities, the Museum's historical archives underwent a gradual dissolution provoked by the neglect of those who curated the collections, and by a process of oblivion that avoided confrontation with the Institution's 'dissonant' past. The reordering activities made it possible to recover part of the archive, which, however, lacks Giovanni Marro's private correspondence – defined by his assistant Savina Fumagalli as an essential source for the identification of the

provenance of ethnographic artefacts (1961: 4) – and the acquisition records of the various collections. The museum is therefore devoid of documentation regarding Marro's relationships, contacts and exchanges with political and power figures of the time, as well as with local and national museum and cultural institutions. In front of the archival lacks, the analysis of the documents 'along and against the archival grain' (Stoler, 2009; Chaudhuri, Katz & Perry, 2010) was essential to recognise the need to focus on the partial nature of the archive (Fuentes, 2016), in order to critically address documentary absences.

The urge to break the deadlock of a 'missing' archive was pursued by reinterpreting the museum's own narratives and the knowledge produced about its heritage. The study of the historical vicissitudes of the collections and personalities that gravitated around Marro and the MAET proved to be anything but neutral. Thus, curatorial practices – such as inventorying and cataloguing – were set to be a first way of overcoming the barriers of what Michel-Rolph Trouillot called 'archival silence', confirmed in the MAET experience:

Silences enter the process of historical production at four crucial moments: the moment of fact creation (the making of sources); the moment of fact assembly (the making of archives); the moment of fact retrieval (the making of narratives); and the moment of retrospective significance (the making history in the final instance) (Trouillot, 1995: 26).

In the case of the MAET, the 'silence' dimension mainly concerns the collections of non-European material culture. The absence of the traces and voices of the 'source communities' and of those who collected and exported the objects is the legacy of past and outdated models and modes of curatorship that have affected the artefacts in more recent times – as discussed at the beginning of this contribution. It therefore seems possible to assume that the 'missing' archive not only speaks clearly of an 'unspeakable' past of the museum and its founder, but also of the subaltern position of ethnographic collections in relation to other materials. Under the assumption that the MAET was conceived and created when museums and non-European collections were places and pretexts for the definition of 'us' and 'the others', it has been for most of its existence an ethnocentric 'dispositive' (Foucault, 1977); a place where 'colonialist' and 'nationalist' ideology had a precise role in the choices of display and communication of the heritage. For this reason, a reform of the Museum became pressing and necessary, with the purpose of realigning it to new practices and contemporary discourses.

Inventorying and cataloguing represented a first attempt to contextualise and reconstruct the trajectories that collections have travelled from their contexts of production to the place of exhibition. The cataloguing process returns a precise or realistic identity of

cultural heritage, and it is regulated by the Central Institute for Cataloguing and Documentation – an institution of the Ministry of Culture (D.P.R. 805/1975) – which administers the general inventory of Italian heritage.

Considering that museums are not neutral places (Saumarez Smith, 1989) but reflect – as Georges Bataille argued – the identity of the nation in which they were built (Bataille, 1974), they elaborate real narratives on heritage through their practices. In fact, when an object becomes part of a museum collection it acquires a new status becoming a 'historical document' that no longer 'speaks the language of life', but a kind of 'metalanguage' adapted to another symbolic system (Clemente & Rossi, 1999). In this sense, cataloguing – although necessary to define, contextualise and legalise cultural heritage – is above all a 'constructed process', that is the result of mediation and re-elaboration by museum specialists (Price, 1989). For this reason, other valorisation strategies have been required to critically review museum collections and practices. In line with these goals, the MAET has undertaken activities of 'knowledge co-production' (Simon, 2010) with those 'source people' defined by Laura Peers and Alison K. Brown in *Museums and Source Communities*: 'the term "source communities" (sometimes referred to as "originating communities") refers both to these groups in the past when artefacts were collected, as well as to their descendants today' (Peers & Brown, 2003: 2). By involving migrant and diaspora communities, the MAET has developed collaborative projects in order to reflect on the methods of displaying, narrating and enhancing heritage – such as the African and South American collections which have been studied and contextualised with the local migrant communities.

This purpose led the Museum to cope with its second challenge: the closure to the public. In fact, the dialogue with 'source communities' has pushed the MAET to ideally plan its reopening and to carry out educational and exhibition programmes that can create connections with citizens. Since the reopening is still a hypothesis, because it requires concrete resources that fall outside the modern debate on museum practices and decolonisation (Kassim, 2017; Hicks, 2020), the Museum is currently focusing on temporary activities for the public.

Through the web, the MAET has started a variety of activities to engage audiences, promote its heritage and provide educational experiences. Since 2020, it has been curating a monthly column entitled *Objects on shore leave*, in which collections are presented to the public by means of short texts, video interviews and podcasts. This initiative, supported by other dissemination activities, has led the Museum to grapple with the virtual restitution of its heritage, a strategy that proved to be fundamental in order to ward off the social detachment imposed by the Covid-19 pandemic. Since then, the 'digital

presence' has become essential to create and maintain relationships with the public, and to resist and exist in the territory, as for the MAET.

Through the direct involvement of the public, the Museum has planned educational projects and temporary exhibitions. As regards educational projects, after the last relocation of collections, the Museum began to define activities for students and adults. A workshop entitled *Around the World in 90 Minutes* was created for children, with the purpose to raise awareness of multiculturalism in contemporary societies, reflecting on the various declinations of 'culture' applied to festivals, rituals, religions and food. On the other hand, guided tours dedicated to the history of the Museum and its collections have been planned for adults and university students and scheduled for lectures or special events.

Regarding temporary exhibitions, these represent another opportunity to make collections accessible and free objects from their condition of 'ineffability'. Since its closure, the MAET has organised and collaborated in numerous exhibition initiatives, aiming not to be forgotten (neither by the academic community nor by the general public) and to establish agreements and conventions with other public or private institutions that could ensure its partial accessibility. The partnerships established over the years have created a real network around the Museum, with local, national and international museums and associations, and have guaranteed its existence and activity. For example, the collaboration with the Piedmontese Center for African Studies has given back two watershed events: *Language against Language. A Collaborative Exhibition* (2008-2009) and *Gelede. Our Yoruba Mothers* (2018). Two exhibitions carried out with some exponents of Turin's migrant communities – actively involved in the choices of displaying and enhancing collections – and aimed at returning part of the MAET's heritage according to a decolonial perspective. These two events enabled it to root even more in its territory and society, and paved the way for other cultural initiatives organised with other local museums, such as the exhibition *Africa. The Forgotten Collections*.

The workshop *Around the World in 90 Minutes*

Within the educational offer of museums, workshops play a key role in enhancing the formative experience. These interactive sessions provide participants, whether children or adults, with a unique opportunity to engage directly with artefacts, artworks, and historical contexts in a hands-on manner. By incorporating activities such as art creation, object handling, role-playing, and multimedia presentations, workshops transform passive observers into active learners, stimulating critical thinking, creativity, and empathy. Through guided exploration and expert facilitation, participants delve deeper into the

subject matter, gaining a richer understanding of cultural heritage, scientific principles, or artistic techniques. Museum workshops serve as dynamic platforms for fostering curiosity, igniting imagination, and nurturing lifelong learning, thereby enriching the educational landscape of both formal and informal settings.

The MAET's workshop *Around the World in 90 Minutes*, addressed to primary school students, aims to educate in cultural heritage by stimulating inductive reasoning and sensitivity towards cultural diversity. Through the game dimension, children embark on a journey around the world discovering 'new' cultural, spiritual, musical and culinary traditions. In this way, the filter of culture as 'web' (Geertz, 1973) – which 'weaves' shared patterns of human behaviour – is deconstructed through 'cultural relativism', a theoretical perspective which suggests that there is no single 'right' way to live or organise societies, but rather a variety of valid and meaningful ways of doing so (Herskovits, 1972: 11). Since each lifestyle and vision of reality is rooted in the history, traditions and specific circumstances of a given culture, the workshop's game board doesn't represent a world map in its conventional position, because the idea of a 'global north' at the top and a 'global south' at the bottom are such trivialising and rigid categories to describe social complexity (Wolf, 1982). Even though these classifications have historically been used to outline socioeconomic divisions between industrialised countries (those in the north) and developing countries (those in the south), they do not consider the 'cultural creativity'^{viii} existing within each society. Thus, by embracing the provocation of Joaquín Torres-García with his graphic work *America Invertida* (1943), the board shows an upside-down planisphere where children can move by following the game tiles and discovering the Museum's objects.

The educational purpose of the game is to 'collect' at least three artefacts, in order to learn their historical or contemporary use and to answer the final questions of the Tlingit totem – in the final tile of the board – which will decide the winning team. During the activity, children have the opportunity to directly see some MAET's objects and to reflect, through game trials and multimedia presentations, on the variety and complexity of cultural heritage. In fact, if the national school system imparts a certain heritage education, aimed at studying the tangible heritage made up of paintings and architectures, the workshop wants to bring students closer to the intangible heritage, consisting of festivals, rituals, myths and oral traditions. This is why the activity lingers on ceremonial events such as the *Gelede* spectacle of the Yoruba in Nigeria, the Andean folk dance of the *Diablada* performed in Peru and Bolivia, or the Javanese shadow theatre (*Wayang Kulit*). Similarly, with regard to tangible heritage, the workshop presents students with ethnographic objects that reflect 'other' aesthetic tastes and ways of conceiving art. This is the case of African statuary – such as *ntadi* or *nkisi* wooden sculptures from Congo – or

South American ritual objects used during ceremonies connected to forms of worship which are very different from the liturgies of the best-known religions 'of the book'. In this manner, students learn to recognise the aesthetic value of 'other' types of tangible and intangible heritage, and familiarise with the notion of 'cultural diversity' – nay, 'cultural uniqueness' – applied to material cultures.

The project 'Africa. Voices from Forgotten Collections'

Another case study which demonstrates the MAET's strategies of resilience and rooting in the territory is represented by its latest exhibition event, concerning African collections. In the last two years, the Museum has taken part in a vast project aimed at studying and enhancing – also with local migrant communities – the African heritage preserved in Piedmont and not on public display. This project, promoted by the Royal Museums of Turin, the Piedmont Regional Directorate of Museums and the MAET, had led to the exhibition *Africa. The Forgotten Collections* (Turin, 27th October 2023 – 25th February 2024): an event that sought to re-establish the history of a less-known continent among the general public, reactivating geographical and cultural routes which lead back to times outside and inside our identity.

The exhibition displayed an almost entirely unpublished heritage – including weapons, sculptures, amulets, jewels, musical and ritual instruments – divided into various collections that bear the names of explorers, engineers, mechanics, soldiers and diplomatic attachés, and summarise a historical phase that for a long time has been concealed or forgotten: the colonial expansion in Africa at the end of the nineteenth century, which began through commercial incursions and ended as military conquest. The artefacts are therefore the results of the exploratory and consular activities promoted by the House of Savoy (the Italian royal family), the collecting activities of the Italians employed by the Independent State of Leopold II and later by the Belgian colony and, finally, the acquisitions in the former Italian colonies that brought to Piedmont diplomatic gifts and other material evidence (De Filippis, Pagella & Pennacini, 2023a).

The display project required an impressive multidisciplinary research work that involved curators and restorers with the aim of overcoming the lack of research and analysis that characterises the African heritage preserved in Turin – and generally in Italy (De Filippis, Pagella & Pennacini, 2023b: 12). The outcome was an itinerary that let the public to soak up the African culture and to explore the socio-political relations between Italy (and in particular the city of Turin) and Africa. The heritage on display had an important role to both connect the museum space to its dynamic dimension of 'forum' and convey images and memories through the objects, which are expression – today as in the past – of the 'source communities' and of the relationship with the 'otherness'. The contemporary

debate on heritage is increasingly questioning the role of cultural and museum institutions in facilitating the citizens' access to culture and heritage, problematising their uncritical practices and policies. This discourse, aimed at overcoming the idea of the museum as a static and ideal space of knowledge, mainly concerns the ethnographic heritage from non-European and colonial contexts. It needs, in fact, to be understood and communicated through sensitivities that leave space of expression to those (individual and collective) subjectivities that can self-identify in it. According to this approach, it is essential that contemporary 'voices' from those societies that were victim of colonial processes are involved in the practices of resignifying objects and sharing memories.

This was the framework for the public engagement project Africa. Voices from Forgotten Collections^{ix}, which launched and facilitated a heritage reinterpretation process through participatory and inclusive practices involving representatives of diaspora communities in Turin. More specifically, the Sudanese Association of Turin, the Association of Migrant Generations and the Association of Ethiopian and Eritrean Friends of Piedmont, all took part in the project coordinated by the Intercultural Centre of Turin and supported by the MAET and Royal Museum's curators. The activity wished to implement the layout itinerary of the exhibition and narrate the relations and exchanges between Italy and African communities, in the perspective of a participatory museum. It therefore proposed a redefinition of the artefacts chosen for the exhibition and a co-production of textual and video content for public use. From the selected objects, the project beneficiaries – together with the curators – were able to directly approach the heritage by proposing a personal and emic rereading of some objects.

The project also included meetings and focus groups to help the involved group to grasp the exhibition purposes and to encourage intercultural dialogue. During these meetings, some participants were involved in recording interviews in which they could share their perceptions, feelings, and memories about the heritage. The outcome was a video that blended the ten interviews carried out with project's participants and was included in the exhibition itinerary. Thanks to the video interviews, shared on the MAET social channels^x, the voices of those with migratory background became mediators between the African heritage and general public, expressing ideas and emotions produced from their encounter with artefacts. In addition, specific guided tours were planned for both 'source communities' and general public, with good feedback from participants. Advertising and sharing content on social networks, enabled to reach both direct and indirect audiences: more than 20,000 people visited the exhibition, while almost 90,000 users were reached through the Instagram, Facebook and YouTube channels of the institutions involved. In doing so, the exhibition was integrated with related activities, which firstly promoted

cultural accessibility and, then, allowed the public to reflect from different perspectives on Italy's controversial colonial past.

The involvement of local diasporic communities – who took part in the exhibition organising committee by interacting with the heritage and pondering both their own culture and the one which collected and resemantised the objects on display – also led to a critical reconsideration of heritage and museum practices. In fact, if, on the one hand, heritage has revealed its 'medium' nature, contributing to bring together different and distant sectors of society, on the other, museum practices have demonstrated their mediative nature. For this reason, the interviews revealed both the enthusiasm on the part of mediators to see something familiar on display, connected to personal life experiences, and the 'frictions' underlying the 'manipulation' of a sensitive and dissonant heritage. Thus, the exhibition was also described as 'a bit too European. An exhibition for you Italians'xi with a title that 'should be changed [...]. For me, the adjective "forgotten" doesn't fit here! Because actually many people know that these objects exist. Voices are being raised for a return or cooperation between museums and communities'xii: words (and sometimes even long silences) that echo past tensions between colonies and colonial powers, and that also resound in the current tensions between, for example, Eritrea and Ethiopia, or in the internal conflicts in Sudan. In this sense, the diasporic dimension of both subjects and objects has taken on the appearance of an experience that was only apparently individual since it is, actually, profoundly collective. This was particularly evident in the participants' attention in providing detailed descriptions of traditional practices related to the objects, often reconstructed only by the contributions of the 'extended community', directly or indirectly engaged through historical images and photographs.

Conclusions: towards a reopening?

The MAET's history, retraced by focusing on its resilience strategies and rooting activities in the territory, has highlighted the critical issues that it is progressively facing. The attempt to overcome the approaches and methods of the past, heirs of Marro's first direction, has initiated new practices of contextualisation of heritage – carried out 'along the archival grain' (Stoler, 2009) and through the involvement of 'source communities' (Peers & Brown, 2003) – which are revealing the potential of the Museum and a new history of the artefacts; an unpublished history that provides a new awareness of the cultural value of heritage. This contribution moved from the awareness that is crucial to (re)think museum's spaces – physical and virtual – to facilitate a detailed reflection on the relationship between museums and the public and on the representation of diversified subjectivities and identities.

Ethnographic objects, having returned to the centre of critical reflections and research practices, are no longer 'exotic' documentation of human diversity, but a resource for knowing the 'others' and understanding 'us'. The case studies here presented are significant in order to consider the MAET's attempts to realign itself with contemporary museum discourses and good practices. Both the workshop *Around the World in 90 minutes* and the project *Africa. Voices from forgotten collections* demonstrate the great work carried out on collections, recontextualised and deconstructed through decolonial approaches, and made accessible – at the moment – through virtual (the website and social networks) and temporary (exhibitions, events and educational activities) restitutions.

These practices place the museum in the broader debate about the accessibility of museums, which often, while open to the public, face the challenge of enhancing and making accessible extensive or difficult-to-exhibit heritages. Indeed, even though the MAET is technically 'closed', is it actually more closed than other institutions? Given that most museums exhibit only a fraction of the collections they possess, resulting, from the public's perspective, more 'closed' than 'open', the MAET's experience is not that different. This condition has required digital access measures – such as virtual tours and online catalogues – and temporary initiatives – such as exhibitions and outreach programs – to display the 'invisible' heritage. Digital access became more crucial than ever during the Covid-19 pandemic, which forced museums to rapidly adapt to being 'closed' physically while trying to remain 'open' digitally.

The MAET is embracing these challenges by orienting its practices toward more co-participatory and interactive modes that do not, however, neglect the debate between academic discourse, museums and communities. The small-scale strategies it has implemented may constitute attempts to facilitate virtuous processes that allow to get over the inaccessibility of museum spaces. In this way, the heritage has had the opportunity to cross the doors of the repositories and to reach and involve wider audiences by activating processes of confrontation and research centred on the objects and subjects involved.

The MAET's chronicles make visible the possible 'contact zones' within the Museum, but also its historical contradictions and the methodological critical issues that still make it closed. The Museum's heritage is made up of vast and complex corpora that need to be reread, studied and valorised in the perspective of a shared knowledge of cultures. Therefore, the wish is to reopen a museum that is in line with today's museological discourses and capable of educating the public on cultural diversity, not only from a

material viewpoint but also from a historical and social perspective. The MAET of the future is an institution which aspires to become a real 'contact zone' (Clifford, 1997), where cultures can meet up and share memories and traditions, and where knowledge can circulate free, creating exchange and collaboration possibilities.

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