

Reinterpreting the Mineral Collections in Rome's Museum of Civilizations

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Abstract

Natural history museums often emphasize technical expertise, which can lead to the isolation of their collections from broader political, cultural, and social contexts. This trend is similarly observed in the presentation of mineral collections, where cultural, historical, and ethical dimensions are frequently overlooked. However, museums with mineral displays have the potential to adopt engagement strategies that foreground the anthropological aspects of these collections. A noteworthy example of this integrative approach is found at the Museum of Civilizations in Rome. This museum hosts ISPRA's (Istituto Superiore per la Protezione e la Ricerca Ambientale – Italian Institute for Environmental Protection and Research) geological and historical collections, former collections from the Museum of Italian Africa, and contemporary artworks. The institution merges these aesthetic, scientific, and anthropological collections to advance a decolonized narrative. It also incorporates art installations that enhance the understanding of cultural and political issues facing anthropology and science museums today. This article uses the museum's innovative approach as a case study to explore the intersection of scientific and historical discourses.

Keywords: Mineral collections, museum communication, anthropological collections, visitor engagement, art installations

Introduction

In 1951, David M. Seaman, associate curator and collector at Harvard Mineralogical Museum, published an article entitled 'What is Wrong with Our Mineral Museums?' Seaman explained why visitors could be discouraged from appreciating mineral collections (Seaman 1951: 522). In his view, inadequate classification and arrangement, poor lighting, minimal planning, a lack of clarification about the nature of minerals, the absence of panels explaining how minerals could be identified, and a lack of originality in presenting the exhibits negatively affected the experiences of visitors. Therefore, he suggested that rather than simply displaying minerals, exhibitions should offer meaningful narratives and stimulate the admiration and enjoyment of the public. Innovative layouts, illumination, graphics, photography, and dioramas could create a successful mineral 'show' (Seaman 1951: 523).¹ From his perspective, these techniques could create an inviting and stimulating environment to understand and admire the exhibition from a scientific and aesthetic point of view, as minerals should be regarded as both scientific specimens and works of art.² Inspired by this dual view of minerals, curators could create dynamic and accessible exhibitions providing enriched educational opportunities for the public.³ In fact, Seaman observed that the general public appreciated minerals primarily for their beauty and as merely decorative objects, noting that gems were 'particularly appealing to ladies' (Seaman 1951: 524) and could serve as an entry point to deeper understanding. He suggested using the existing understanding of minerals as a foundation for further learning.

Seaman's recommendations represent an original and timely perspective on mineral exhibitions. Nevertheless, these observations have seldom been applied. Since the publication of Seaman's article, mineral collections have been discussed in the context of science or university museums with a focus on their chemical and geophysical value and their pedagogical

role in teaching natural science. Research about mineral museum curation practices remains rare. One can mention the works by Datelin Dachev (2009), Subhadra Das and Mirando Lowe (2018), and Aaron Celestian (2019), among the few who discuss curatorial issues surrounding minerals.⁴ More recently, David Gelsthorpe (2021) pointed out the lack of works focusing on the cultural backgrounds of mineral collections.

Moreover, the relationship between private collectors and museums is multifaceted and has not contributed much to developing original curatorial practices. Roy Starkey (1989), documenting a decade marked by substantial growth in amateur private collecting and trading, noted that private collectors frequently prioritize the acquisition and sale of minerals as gemstones rather than the preservation and scholarly examination of their characteristics. This approach contrasts with the mission of museums, which emphasize conservation, accessibility, and public display.⁵ Although individual collectors have played a significant role in enhancing the appreciation of minerals through fairs and shows and may share an interest in mineralogy as a science, they are a self-contained community (Pop et al. 2004).

Against this backdrop, this article discusses ways to valorize and exhibit minerals beyond the traditional educational role that scientific collections typically serve. I consider the litho-mineral collection housed at the Museo delle Civiltà, or MUCIV (Museum of Civilizations) in Rome, as a case study of innovative curatorial practice. I employ a qualitative descriptive approach to examine the design, organization, and public presentation of the museum's exhibitions, providing an overview of their interpretive strategies. Furthermore, this paper examines the potential created by presenting mineral specimens in non-scientific contexts. By displaying minerals in artistic, cultural, or interactive settings, it is possible to enhance public engagement and appreciation, thereby broadening the understanding and significance of these natural artefacts. In the following paragraphs, I first describe MUCIV and its particular history. I then explain the position of the mineral collection in the context of the museum's anthropological exhibitions. In particular, I examine the most controversial among these: the former Colonial Museum, also known as Museo dell'Africa Italiana [Museum of Italian Africa], now rearranged and identified as Museo delle Opacità [Museum of Opacity].⁶ I argue that pairing mineralogy and anthropology in the same space challenges visitors by blending scientific inquiry with cultural and ethical reflections. This approach not only enriches the understanding of mineralogical collections but stimulates broader discussions about the role of museums of anthropology in contemporary society. The merging of these collections is a positive example of interdisciplinarity and creativity that may stimulate a new contextualization of traditional collections, realizing what Seaman believed could be a novel view of a mineral museum.

From 'Colonial' to 'Civilization': Words That Matter in Defining a Museum's Mission

In recent years, critical theories challenging museums and exhibition spaces have inspired initiatives that genuinely seek to address and rectify colonial biases and their influence on curators' choices (Procter 2020). As Brandie Macdonald (2022), Bruno Brulon Soares (2023) and William Boelhower (2023), among others, point out, discussing social, political, and cultural contexts is essential for a museum to achieve a comprehensive and balanced presentation of its collections. From this perspective, it is essential to rethink the institutional role of a museum and to consider it a site of dynamic spatial configuration that houses a range of meanings which must be evaluated against the context that gave rise to them (Schorch 2023). Similarly, museums must address techniques, arrangements, management, and authority as fundamental subjects that shape their organization and exhibitions (Black 2020: 143-95; Eid and Forstrom 2021: 27-39). MUCIV is a case in point.⁷

The Museum of Civilizations is a composite institution featuring diverse permanent collections primarily focusing on anthropology. The museum was established in 2016 to preserve, study, and promote anthropological collections and artefacts gathered by various state-run institutions. With over 2,000,000 works and documents displayed in approximately 80,000 square metres of exhibition space and storerooms, MUCIV hosts the original collections of the Prehistoric, Ethnographic Museum Luigi Pigorini; The Oriental Art Museum Giuseppe Tucci; the Museum of Late Antiquity; and the Popular Museum of Arts and Traditions; together with the collections of the former Colonial Museum, the Museum of Agriculture, and ISPRA,

the Institute for Environmental Protection and Research.

In displaying these varied collections, the museum creates an original mixture that testifies to the historical development and diversity of human culture. These exhibits offer multiple perspectives and incorporate art by those whose works and installations are or have been presented in the institution. These contributions spark new ideas and offer novel experiences to visitors encountering prehistoric objects, items from late antiquity, Asian art, nineteenth-century popular culture, and scientific specimens. Visitors are encouraged to devise a personal and comprehensive exploration of the idea of civilization as they move around two monumental rationalist buildings dating back to the fascist *ventennio*.⁸ The museum functions as a unified entity when the interdisciplinary collections and the buildings merge to form a single, significant experience (fig. 1).



Figure 1: MUCIV in its two main components: the Palace of Science (right) and the Palace of Popular Traditions (left). Photo: Andrea Ricci. <http://www.youtube.com/@MuseoDelleCiviltàRoma>.

Given the type and variety of the collections, the museum recognizes the challenge of exhibiting anthropological artefacts to a modern audience. Director Andrea Villani stated in a recent interview that MUCIV is

a museum in which enhancing the collections means supporting the formulation and reformulation of public opinion on them, a discursive, critical and self-critical space-time [dimension] in which to share a reflection [...] triggered by these specific collections, on issues and perspectives among the most necessary and urgent of our time. Therefore, the Museum of Civilizations is inherently contemporary [author's translation].⁹

The interdisciplinary approach to the concept of civilization serves as a model of how art and aesthetics can constructively engage with discursive practices that have the potential to incite ideological and cultural conflicts (Oberg and Nelson-Mayson 2021).

The word 'civilization', in Italian *civiltà*, derives from the Latin *civilitas* and refers to the

objective and material construction of human identity, notably through artefacts. In the context of this museum, the word civilization is primarily used to explain the complex interactions and developments of human societies. This approach emphasizes the interconnectedness of cultural, social, and historical aspects, illustrating how artefacts reflect and contribute to understanding civilization as a dynamic and multifaceted concept.

For this reason, samples from late antiquity and the early Middle Ages are juxtaposed with nineteenth-century rural popular traditions. These objects testify to the transition from the Roman Empire to a new civilization initiated by the Germanic populations that conquered the peninsula; hence, they may be interpreted as prototypes of contemporary cultural hybridity. The arts and crafts of Italian popular culture go hand in hand with arts and crafts from Asia and the Pacific.

The inclusion of anthropological collections from the era of Italian fascism, particularly specimens from the African colonies such as textiles, tools, statuettes, and photographs, aims to provoke discussion about the historical narrative of the Italian colonial empire. This approach encourages a deeper and more accurate understanding of the complexities of twentieth-century Italian history by challenging long-held misconceptions and overlooked aspects of the Italian presence in Africa, which was far from idyllic and peaceful (Schneider 2020: 223-8; Deplano and Pes 2024: chapter 2).¹⁰ The great variety of exhibits becomes a source of innovation rather than being a mere collection of disparate objects.

A Place of Complexity

The museum's architecture also corresponds to multiple levels of representation and frames the interpretation of civilization. MUCIV is hosted in two buildings: *Palazzo delle Scienze* (Science Palace) and *Palazzo delle Arti e Tradizioni Popolari* (Popular Arts and Traditions Palace). Both buildings were erected for the Universal Exhibition of Rome in 1942 (fig. 2).

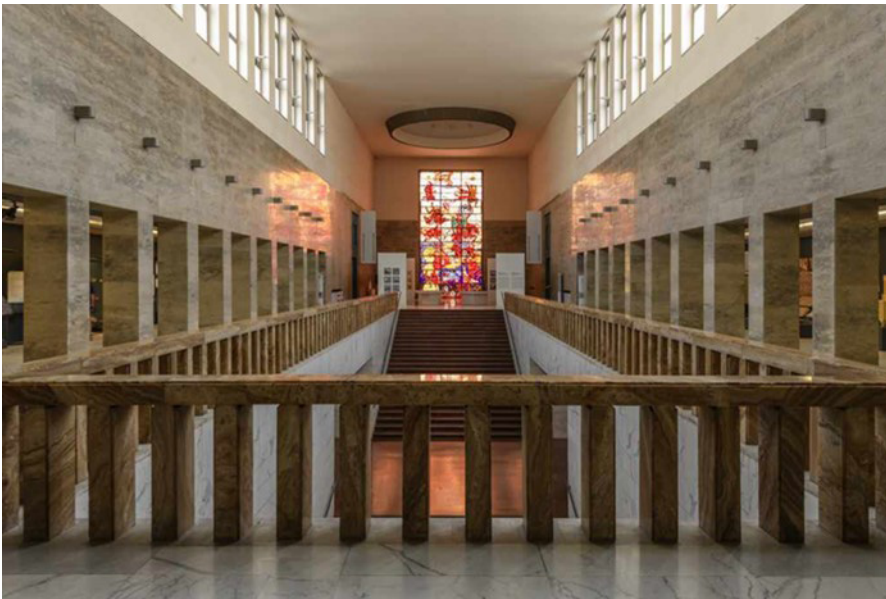


Figure 2: MUCIV – Palazzo delle scienze, main stairs. Photo: MUCIV website.

The exhibition was initially scheduled to coincide with the twentieth anniversary of Mussolini's rise to power and was intended to showcase Italian civilization. It was expected that Italian history and its present-day developments would emerge triumphant, mainly due to the persuasive power of the architecture specially created for the event. The decorative elements

of the edifices also served as tangible manifestations of the transformation and modernization of society. The project represented the aspiration to renovate the ‘spirit’ of the Roman Empire with buildings that recalled its grandeur. Broad streets and imposing structures predominantly built with white marble were intended to evoke the classical monuments of ancient imperial Rome. The capital of the Kingdom of Italy was to be seen as the capital of a modern empire firmly rooted in its Roman heritage. The district that was to host the exhibition was divided into sections, each dedicated to a specific theme. These included art, science, corporate economy, Italian Africa, leisure, and international cultures. Another section comprised a model Italian city. The buildings hosting MUCIV were built according to these principles and enriched with artworks such as mosaics entitled *The Arts and the Professions* (1942) by Fortunato Depero and *Corporazioni* (the Fascist guilds) by Enrico Prampolini (1942). Other artworks included a painting by Valerio Frascchetti, *Science and its Technical Application* (1942) and a large stained-glass window by Giulio Rosso representing the zodiac and the solar system (1941) (fig. 3). These works were meant to celebrate labour, which, along with the crafts and skills of artisans, was considered the spine of a fascist society. Science and a futuristic vision of the world were also part of the exhibition inside the building as they represented progress, which Italian fascism sought to embody and mediate for the masses.



Figure 3: Giulio Rosso, 1941-3, 'Astronomy', MUCIV – Palazzo delle scienze, main stairs. Photo: MUCIV website.

Wall frescoes celebrated Italian traditions, while the hall, where the litho-mineral collection is now housed, features an inlaid marble floor designed by Mario Tozzi in 1941 to represent science and its achievements (fig. 4). The floor, divided into several parts, depicts images related to zoology, palaeontology, cosmography, physiology, and physics. Minerva, the goddess of science, is depicted in the centre of the floor, where the varied marbles are meant to exemplify the lithological collection. Here, stones shaped into a work of art become displayable, meaningful, and enjoyable: visitors are invited to move from nature's art to human art and to appreciate the mosaic as a valuable interpretation of the Italian geo-mineral heritage.



Figure 4: Mario Tozzi, 1941, MUCIV Hall Floor. Photo: Giorgio Benni.

As the visitor moves around the two buildings and across large spaces, the various objects on display are set in a context that does not correspond to their intrinsic meaning or origin. This is a sort of spatial relocation where the exhibits are situated in a different intellectual dimension that invites visitors to consider the objects not only as individual artefacts but also in relation to broader themes and implications associated with the historical period represented by the building. The experience is both alienating and engaging, as the cultural differences of the exhibits are highlighted but, at the same time, presented as a cohesive fusing of meanings. This juxtaposition allows visitors to understand the cultural significance of the exhibits as part of a broader historical discourse, appreciating both their intrinsic cultural diversity and their relevance to the present narrative of Italian history. This perspective can be better appreciated by closely examining how mixing contexts, objects, and art forms creates an engaging and thought-provoking environment for the visitor. Let us consider two examples.

The Colonial Museum

Among the historical and anthropological collections at MUCIV are two special sets of objects: the colonial and the litho-mineral. They are exceptional for two reasons: the colonial collection includes controversial specimens from the former Italian African colonies (Libya, Eritrea, Somalia, and Ethiopia), while the litho-mineral collection appears unrelated to the other exhibits. Nevertheless, this collection is now presented as fitting within the anthropological framework, thus becoming integral to the overall permanent exhibition.¹¹

The collections of the former Museo Coloniale in Rome date back to 1923, when Mussolini opened an institution designed to preserve materials collected from the Italian colonies in previous decades. The inaugural exhibition included artefacts such as daggers, armour, sculptures, jewels, textiles, drums, and facial casts previously displayed at fairs celebrating the colonies, captivating audiences with the allure of 'exotic' indigenous cultures.¹²

Initially situated at Palazzo della Consulta, the site of the High Judicial Court, where it shared premises with the Colonial Ministry, the museum was considered subordinate to the political and colonial undertakings of the regime. After the proclamation of the Italian Empire in 1936, the museum's name was changed to Museo dell'Africa Italiana (Museum of Italian Africa). The museum was then closed for many years for inventory checks. It briefly resumed its activity in 1947 and opened intermittently until the museum was permanently closed in the early 1970s. The independence of the former colonies after World War II, the lack of funding, and a decline in interest contributed to the decision to close the museum. The collection was finally relocated to the Ministry of Culture in 2017 and became part of the Museo delle Civiltà. This problematic history of the collection, being linked to Italian fascism and hence unfit for

display in the postwar Italian republic, testifies to Italy's complex relationship with its colonial past, often considered distant in geographical and temporal terms and represented as a guiltless event in the collective imaginary of native Italians (Dalmazzo et al. 2022).

MUCIV has decided not to repatriate these specimens, which would be impossible given the unknown or uncertain origin of many of them.¹³ Instead, it has chosen to preserve, research, and interpret the historical arrangement of the items to help visitors develop a more personal experience of their controversial origins. MUCIV selected specimens from the collection and turned them into a new permanent exhibition, Museo delle Opacità (opened in June 2023). The title refers to the ambiguity of the Italian colonial legacy, the embarrassment, and the denial of Italy's colonization history. This new exhibition, which also serves as a venue for art performances, is physically connected to other sections of the museum within the same building, creating a pathway through previously unexplored memories (fig. 5-6).¹⁴



Figure 5: MUCIV, Museo delle Opacità, Room. Photo: Giorgio Benni.



Figure 6: MUCIV, Museo delle Opacità, Room. Photo: Giorgio Benni.

At present, a starting point for visitors is the installation by Jermy Michael Gabriel, *Yekatit 12* (2022), which creates a visual and historical connection with the monumental staircase of the museum. The work is a copy of a monument built in Addis Ababa during the colonial period, which became a symbol of independence at the end of the occupation.¹⁵

On the first floor, the visitor finds an exhibition that reconstructs the life and research of artist and anti-colonial activist Bertina Lopes.¹⁶ This exhibition is juxtaposed with a series of drawings and paintings (accompanied by books, photographs, and working tools) that highlight the Italian colonial mentality, racist attitudes and atrocities, committed in conflicts in Mozambique (fig. 7). Labels and explanations are minimal, encouraging audience members to interpret the materials independently and to engage deeply with their reactions to colonization, offering a more introspective experience.



Figure 7: Bertina Lopes, *Via XX Settembre 98, la casa come luogo di resistenza*, Exhibition at MUCIV June 2023 – January 2024. Photo: MUCIV website.

In general, all the artworks that coexist with the colonial exhibits encourage viewers to connect the historical context with contemporary perspectives, generating fresh interpretations and insights. What was looted is given new life in a different environment, making the experience meaningful to the viewer. As a result, the exhibits themselves emerge as artefacts worthy of appreciation for their intrinsic significance beyond their historical and colonial associations.¹⁷ This key strategy is applied in other areas of the museum as a productive form of engagement. Re-examining specimens from the colonial past reveals the areas shaped by a concealed history of conquest, encouraging visitors to confront the challenges of its legacy. Curators avoid linear narratives, opting for juxtapositions and suggestions that visitors can explore at their own pace. This strategy provides a nuanced understanding of the exhibits' context. Similarly, the presentation of the litho-mineral collection invites visitors to engage critically with the past and the impact of human activity on the environment.

The Multi-species Museum: The Odd Neighbour

The litho-mineral collection of the Museo delle Civiltà is adjacent to the Museo delle Opacità. In 2022, the Museo delle Civiltà presented *Animals, Plants, Rocks and Minerals: The ISPRA Collections, Towards a Multi-species Museum*, as a first step in gradually reclassifying and finding different ways of showcasing the scientific holdings. The exhibition name refers to the inclusion of samples from different collections documenting the coexistence of human, animal, mineral, and plant species on the planet. The litho-mineral collection connects to the other permanent collections at the museum because colonialism has had a deep

impact on the natural environment of the colonies, and more generally, mining has affected the landscape and lives of many human and nonhuman communities in Italy and abroad. Moreover, considering the litho-mineral collection as an integral part of the anthropological museum shifts its context beyond science toward a more holistic interpretation (Lourenço and Gessner 2014). This approach represents a novel design for displaying minerals that could be expanded to science and university museums in general.

When the fundamental theories of geology were broadened in the nineteenth century, geologists relied on colonial expeditions to collect data and, most importantly, specimens. This resulted in various depots of minerals, rocks, and fossils that scientists could access without leaving home. The accumulation of these specimens coincided with the establishment of formal museums, leading to object-based collections (Hearth and Robbins 2023). The collection at MUCIV evolved in this manner but mainly resulted from fieldwork during the mineral surveys of the country initiated after the unification of Italy in 1861. Present holdings comprise over 150,000 samples of fauna and flora fossils, minerals, rocks, geological maps, scientific instruments, portraits, busts, relics, and documents that were catalogued as part of the litho-mineralogical, historical, and palaeontological collections of the Geological Survey of Italy (1873).¹⁸ From the beginning, the stones and minerals were not only treated as scientific specimens but as integral elements of Italy's heritage, and the museum acknowledged the specimens' profound connections to the communities that lived in the areas where the minerals were collected (De Wever and Guiraud 2017; Pijet-Migoń and Migoń 2022; Pescatore et al. 2023).

Numerous specimens were also acquired through purchases and donations. Among these are the well-known 'Pescetto' and 'De Santis' samplings of ancient marbles, which hold significant scientific, historical, and museological value and have gained international recognition.¹⁹ Moreover, the collection holds the geological and topographical reliefs, consisting of 17 works made from plaster or metal and painted in oil that are prototypes of 3D land mapping. Despite its modest size, this collection holds significant prominence, containing geological plan-reliefs of areas crucial to industry, geological risk assessment, and geological and geomorphological studies. These plan-reliefs were commissioned to depict land areas more accurately than conventional maps. They served as three-dimensional representations for educational purposes, economic decision-making, and the promotion of Italian geological knowledge (fig. 8). A selection of technical-scientific historical instruments, also showcased, comprises approximately 250 pieces. These tools supported the research and land surveying activities of the Geological Survey over its history. This selection includes various items such as framed pictures, commemorative plaques, round bronze bas-reliefs, statuettes, medals, lithographic stones, oil paintings, historical maps, and topographic relief maps. Together, these artefacts offer insights into the history of the survey and the individuals connected to it.

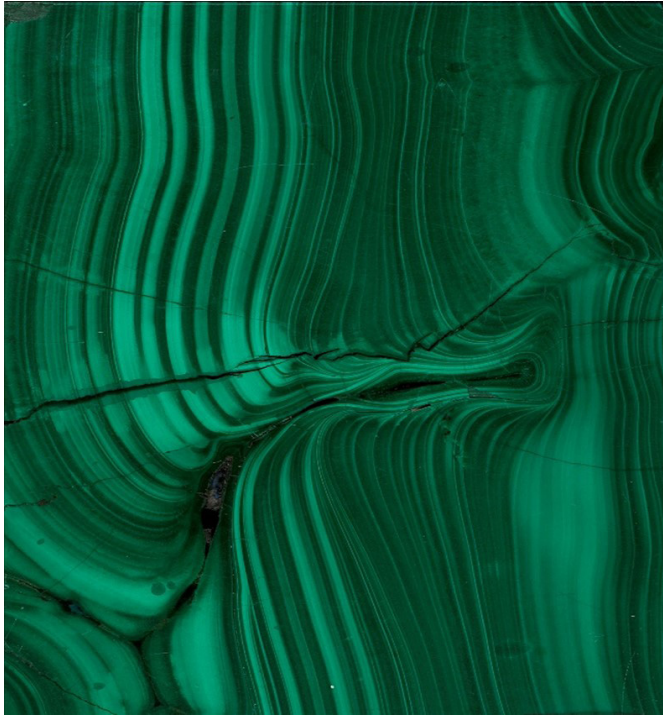


Figure 8: Mineral sample from Ispra Collection (malachite, Saudi Arabia, ISPRALithomineralogic De Santis Collections). Photo: MUCIV website.

The curators of MUCIV arranged a selection of these items as if they were objects of an anthropological exhibition or artworks, thus prioritizing the aesthetic, social, and historical elements over the scientific context: the stones, marbles, and minerals as something that humans could craft and interact with beyond their scientific nature and economic value (Berger and Alexander 2020). The idea that the collection illustrates the relationship between man and the land is also reinforced by the works of contemporary artists, which may be displayed in the same space. The artists' creations highlight similar subjects; they address colonialism and demonstrate their concern about environmental issues. In particular, the installations and performances of three contemporary artists, Marzia Migliora, Adriana Bustos, and Otobong Nkanga, have accompanied the collections and offered different ways of experiencing the objects on display, linking their past to contemporary issues of climate and geology. The three artists employ colour, abstraction, and texture to connect all the senses and enrich the link between the aesthetic and current climatic and geological urgencies.

Marzia Migliora (born in 1972, living and working in Turin) creates art that critically represents the consequences of an economy reliant on fossil fuels. She also focuses on how humanity's desire for progress directly impacts contemporary environmental issues. The installation *Moving Multi-species Score* (2022) was specially created for the litho-mineral collection. It involves collaborating with Marinelli, a renowned studio of film sound designers. Using soundscapes created by humans that mimic the sounds of nature, the installation brings back to life the echoes of millions of lives initially hidden within these fossils, rocks, and minerals that have become artefacts (fig. 9).



Figure 9: PERFORMANCE Marzia Migliora, *Partitura multispecie andante Environmental sound installation* at MUCIV, 14 December 2022, among ISPRA litho-mineral specimen. Photo: MUCIV website.

Adriana Bustos, born in 1965 and still working in Buenos Aires, creates new versions of ancient cosmologies and depictions of the Earth. She blends imagery from diverse cultural backgrounds and geographies. In the painting *Map of Reincarnation* (2021), the artist reimagines a drawing by the Jesuit scientist Athanasius Kircher (1602-1680)²⁰ to depict the interconnectedness of human life cycles, exploration narratives, and Earth's geological rhythms, merging cultures and nature into a unified system (fig. 10).



Figure 10: Adriana Bustos *Map of Reincarnation*, 2022 MUCIV–ANIMALI, VEGETALI, ROCCE E MINERALI: LE COLLEZIONI ISPRA > Verso un museo multispecie. Photo: Giorgio Benni.

Otobong Nkanga, born in 1974 in Nigeria and currently living and working in Antwerp, explores the hidden narratives within earth's geology by developing intricate interweaving, sedimentations, and multi-species systems. This approach highlights the problematic relationship between humans and the environment and highlights the inseparable connection between human behaviours and natural phenomena. In the *Social Consequences I and II* series of drawings exhibited at the museum, Nkanga avoids subjective evaluations and employs clear, concise language with a logical structure that digs into the idea of nature and its relation to people. The artist demonstrates the social consequences of global extraction and depicts the correlations between human activities performed in different epochs and their impact on the Earth's ecosystem. With an intricate vocabulary of body parts and forms, her drawings and tapestries portray the intersection of realities across different locations. In *Social Consequences I: Crisis* (2009), an acrylic and sticker drawing on paper, two bodies with multiple arms instead of heads engage in a tug-of-war using a rope to support two islands on either side.

The image recalls the manipulations of nature caused by extraction (fig. 11).



Figure 11: Otobong Nkanga, *Social Consequences I: Crisis*, 29 x 42cm, 2009, Round stickers, acrylic on paper, Collection: Huisman/Jurriëns. <https://www.otobong-nkanga.com/social-consequences>.

Wall colours such as Pompeian red and white, a geometric layout of the exhibits, and overflowing light stage the marbles and minerals. Displayed aesthetically as a distinct object, each item represents a category or a node in the taxonomy of the overall collection. Selection is thus a significant aspect of the litho-mineral exhibition. In contrast, the conventional approach of using panels to explain the geology and chemistry of specimens is minimized. Descriptive labels placed on black slates or, more commonly, on white squares reduce the information, foregrounding the visual appreciation of objects and a more intuitive and personal engagement with them (fig. 12). Ideally, this curatorial perspective stimulates visitors to reconsider their views on heritage without distractions and, for the moment, without technology, as neither audio guides nor other audio-description tools are currently available. This repositioning marks a departure in how litho-mineral collections are conceptualized, with the samples being viewed as unique, echoing Seaman's recommendation, as well as introducing new ways to appreciate their aesthetic and historical significance while leaving the construction of meaning in the visitor's hands (Seaman 1951: 523).



Figure 12: Animali, Vegetali, Rocce e Minerali. Le Collezioni ISPRA. Verso un museo multispecie – Museo delle Civiltà, Roma – Installation view. Photo: Giorgio Benni.

In other words, the litho-mineral collection intertwines insights from contemporary artistic research with scientific disciplines, properly integrating historical, environmental, and cultural narratives. The works of the artists reinterpret the collection objects within the context of modern environmental and social issues, prompting viewers to reflect on the enduring impacts of practices such as colonialism and mining, which are now part of the broader debate about climate change and cultural diversity.

Aesthetic recontextualization enhances this reflective experience by utilizing light, abstraction, sound, and texture across the exhibition space, stimulating sensory engagement and deepening the connection between the object's aesthetics and its narratives. By presenting the artefacts through an artistic lens, the exhibition aims to take the exhibits out of context and isolate them in their uniqueness. This approach refocuses attention on the intellectual qualities of these objects, encouraging viewers to reflect on the interconnectedness of human experiences across time and place. Artists thus unsettle audience expectations by transforming passive viewer interactions into active engagement.

Conclusion

Balancing the aesthetic interpretation of the collections with a thorough reconstruction of their origins and meaning is an ongoing effort. As visitors transition from examining the 'exotic' objects and relics of Italian colonialism to exploring the litho-mineral collection, they encounter a new dimension where specimens are presented as art and artefacts of civilization. Typically, visitors appreciate a linear taxonomical narrative with a clear beginning and end, reflecting a progressive understanding of the natural world or the chronological development of a collection. However, contemporary museums increasingly adopt reflexive and adaptable methods for interpreting history and depicting the natural world, emphasizing their interconnected and contingent nature. Consequently, a non-linear approach is often preferred. This innovative method, as exemplified at MUCIV, while potentially challenging to understand, aims to provide a more holistic and nuanced experience (Carnall et al. 2013). Whether viewed as a unique perspective fitting the Italian cultural context or as a best practice for other curatorial settings remains a subject of debate, particularly concerning the development of pedagogical

strategies to inform the public about colonialism and its impact on humans and nature alike (Lorente 2022: 30-41).

Seaman believed that captivating 'staged' exhibitions could be effectively educational by arranging objects to tell compelling stories, using dramatic lighting, and creating stimulating environments. This approach also emphasized the importance of highlighting the natural and anthropological contexts in which minerals could be found. Moreover, Seaman advocated reflection on how curators could describe minerals to both experts and the general public, hence the challenge of balancing specialized, informative communication and plain language (Seaman 1951: 525). I concur with him that collections have the potential to be viewed from an interdisciplinary perspective and situated in novel contexts. Balancing specialized and more popular narratives is essential to engage visitors (Eiranen et al. 2022).

The curatorial approach I described in this article aligns with Foucault's concept of the 'will to truth', as MUCIV challenges established perspectives on minerals in their pedagogical, exemplary, and scientific roles by developing an alternative narrative of display in which the litho-mineral collection meets art (Wolfe 2003). This shift in representation involves moving away from earlier approaches that treated minerals merely as curiosities, displayed in isolation without more profound significance for nonspecialists. Instead, this new approach aims to provide a more balanced and comprehensive portrayal of what minerals are and what they represent (Bushnell 1995; Brydon 2004).

Historically, museums have reinforced dominant cultural narratives, often exoticizing non-European cultures to fit European interpretations (Gray 2004: 493-509; Suman 2009). In contrast, MUCIV's modern curatorial practices reflect contemporary social, cultural, and political contexts, incorporating the perspectives of minority and non-European communities. This approach aligns with current debates on decolonizing science museums, promoting a more inclusive and respectful representation (Thomas 2013: 1-11; Addis et al. 2023).

MUCIV collaborates with artists, connecting people from different origins and backgrounds and past and modern cultures. These efforts address the impacts of colonialism and provide a more comprehensive understanding of its cultural significance (Pasquaré and Venturini 2017; Turner 2020: 3-27; Eiranen et al. 2022). Regarding the litho-mineral collection, this integrated approach, combining educational and research significance with historical and cultural values, fit within the framework of geoheritage. It ensures that exhibits are accessible to the public and prevents mineral collections from becoming mere relics.

Conflict of interest statement: The author received no funds and has no academic collaboration or connection with MUCIV (Museo delle Civiltà, Rome).

Notes

- ¹ To this day, Seaman's article is unique in discussing practical curatorial concerns in the context of mineral collections. Conservation issues have been studied and investigated in the context of science museums (Baars and Horak 2018).
- ² Among his suggestions: 'A Kodachrome transparency of the Bikini Bomb explosion, with a coloured wheel revolving behind the transparency to give changing colours to the cloud effect of the explosion, could be used to call attention to atoms. ... It might be possible to arrange a pushbutton mechanism to start in motion a small steel ball attached by an invisible steel wire to a larger steel ball for the centre of the atom and to have it swing around in a circle to show the motion of an electron around a proton' (Seaman 1951: 523).
- ³ Seaman recommends making 'a fluorescent Christmas Tree for the last two weeks in December. Fluorescent and non-fluorescent minerals could be arranged on the tree to be beautiful under artificial and ultraviolet light. Crystals of a number of the more colourful minerals, such as those of azurite, malachite, wulfenite, sulphur, quartz, etc., in sizes not over an inch or an inch and a half in size may be used to great advantage under ordinary electric light... For the month of October, with Hallowe'en and its masks and masquerading, an exhibit of mineral pseudomorphs should make an exciting display. These deceptive crystals have false faces, possessing the outward crystal form of one mineral and the

chemical composition of another, and may be explained in terms of Mother Nature's own masquerading' (Seaman 1951: 524).

Among the books for amateurs, one could mention a 'practical' guide to mineral collecting published under the supervision of Prof. Gramaccioli in Italian designed to 'educate' the lay public to use the right tools to extract minerals and prepare, store, and display specimens in a proper case with a specific order, thus creating a 'home-made' scientific taxonomy (Gramaccioli at al. 1973).

- 5 More specifically, Roy Starkey addressed the challenges and ethical considerations surrounding the relationships between individual collectors and museums, highlighting issues such as provenance, preservation, and the commercialization of mineral specimens to ensure that valuable minerals are properly documented, preserved, and made accessible for research and public education. Online catalogues and social media groups bridge the separation between collectors and institutions.
- 6 The Museo Coloniale in Rome, established in 1923 to exhibit Italy's colonial endeavours, has undergone several name changes reflecting shifting perspectives and political climates. Initially, it was renamed the Museo Italo Africano in 1954, focusing on Italy's African connections. Recently, it has been incorporated into the Museo delle Civiltà (Museum of Civilizations), which takes a broader, more inclusive approach to representing global cultures and histories. Within this institution, the Museo delle Opacità, a project hosted at the Museo delle Civiltà, critiques and addresses the colonial legacies and narratives within museum collections.
- 7 A banner on the museum's main web page states that: 'The Museum of Civilizations has started a process of progressive yet radical revision that aims at questioning and rewriting its history, its institutional ideology, and its research and pedagogical methods. Also, the website will reflect these transformations, and it will be progressively updated'. The banner indicates that the exhibitions are kept in flux, as impermanent works in progress, so the collections can be used in ways that adapt and 'mould' according to the needs and sensibility of the public. <https://www.museodellecivilta.it/>.
- 8 From 1922 to 1943, a period referred to as the *ventennio fascista* ('twenty fascist years'), Italy was ruled by Mussolini and the National Fascist Party.
- 9 The interview is available at: <https://www.tribune.com/professionisti/2022/07/andrea-viliani-museo-delle-civiltà-roma/>.
- 10 In the words of Antonio Morone (2024): 'In the post-Second World War period, Italy based much of its efforts to reclaim its colonies on the labour of its settlers in Africa but ended up politically ditching them and blotting them from historical memory. By 1949, any chance of returning to an old colonial policy was irrevocably gone. The settlers helped impose colonial order based on the supposed racial and social superiority of Italians to their African subjects. It was precisely the end of colonialism and the departure of many settlers for Italy that called into question their own identity construct as champions of Italianness when they found themselves being discriminated against in their homeland for not being completely or sufficiently "Italian"'.
- 11 Data about visitors' responses are being gathered but are not yet available at the time of writing. Nevertheless, informal conversations with staff testify to the success of the museum.
- 12 Among the objects are twenty casts from research in Libya conducted by anthropologist Lidio Cipriani in the 1930s. The casts are of faces imprinted in plaster. It was thought that they offered a method of documentation superior to photography, which had not yet become widely used. The individual, positioned on the ground, awaited the application

of a cast of warm plaster to the face. This was done to obtain a matrix, a facial cast in negative, which served as a mould for subsequent copies of the original. Subsequently, the casts were painted in brown shades that represented the actual pigmentation of the skin, and every detail was reproduced, including any tattoos.

- ¹² For additional information, see: https://www.dropbox.com/scl/fi/81swebkw937af2tueecyb/2023.06.06_MDC_-_Museo-delle-Opacita-_Bertina-Lopes_FINAL.pdf?rikey=hn8eygk2915ix1givaa23henz&e=1&dl=0.
- ¹³ In 1959, the writer Édouard Glissant participated in the *Congress of Black Writers and Artists* in Rome hosted by the Italian Institute for Africa. Interestingly, this organization had inherited the management of the former colonial museum in Rome three years before. Glissant's poetics rejected transparency, emphasizing that nothing is transparent, concrete, and authentic. Instead, only situations and opaque identities exist in dynamic encounters, conflicts, mediations, negotiations, and reconciliations (Glissant 2020: 16-9). By adopting Glissant's perspective, the Museo delle Opacità links Italy's colonial past and its contemporary relevance. This approach ensures that the past informs Italians' self-understanding, aspirations, and future interactions.
- ¹⁴ A short video available from the MUCIV YouTube channel provides the background. Watch: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=C70NUdNc63M>.
- ¹⁵ Born in Maputo in 1924 to a European father and an African mother, Lopes studied painting and drawing in Lisbon, coming into contact with European Modernism and beginning to fuse the Western artistic avant-garde with the African tradition. Back in Maputo, where she was forced to return in the early 1960s due to her political views, she participated in movements for independence from Portugal. In 1964, she moved to Rome, where she reached artistic maturity, expressing her African identity and anti-colonialist beliefs.
- ¹⁶ Over the years, she has maintained her connection with the political events in Mozambique, from national independence (1975) to the subsequent civil war. Over the decades her style has gone through phases, absorbing primitivist, cubist, informal and cosmic-psychedelic influences, reflecting her dual identity, as well as colonial and post-colonial history. In her works, art is closely intertwined with political activism and social criticism, becoming a means of expressing personal and collective freedom. To know more watch: https://youtu.be/smEqiWwwGTg?si=_kw2fgAGKV7ecHDp.
- ¹⁷ Despite recent criticism and analysis of its questionable practices, Italy's almost century-long African colonial history remains largely unexamined. The Museo delle Opacità shows visitors the 2011 docufilm *Inconscio Italiano*, directed by Luca Guadagnino, which provides a detailed and demystifying exploration of the colonial legacy. The film features interviews with historians, anthropologists, and philosophers woven into archival propaganda movie clips, dismantling the preconceptions acquired passively. This is not a militant approach or a way to bring the past directly into the contemporary political arena, yet it is meant to stimulate reflection, personally and privately.
- ¹⁸ See also: <https://www.isprambiente.gov.it/en/ispra-services/forms-and-services/the-geological-survey-of-italy/the-history-of-the-geological-survey-of-italy>.
- ¹⁹ For more information, see: <https://www.isprambiente.gov.it/it/attivita/museo/pubblicazioni/collezioni-museali-i-marmi-antichi-nelle-collezioni-pescetto-e-de-santis>.
- ²⁰ MUCIV holds a portion of Kircher's *Wunderkammer*: <https://www.museodellciviltà.it/preistoria-etnografia/>.

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