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The Collections of historical and pedagogical ethno-anthropological busts of the University Museum of Chieti

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ABSTRACT

At the University Museum of Chieti, two distinct series of ethnographic busts are preserved for educational purposes, dating back to the early 20th century. These collections originate from materials provided respectively by the F. Masci State Scientific High School and the S. Pio X Pontifical Regional Seminary of Chieti to the Museum, in 2018 and 2013. The aim is to investigate the provenience of the series and their original pedagogical function within the context of early 20th-century school collections. The models in both series are made of plaster. The museum also houses an ancient print on human populations, used for educational purposes. These collections

played an innovative educational role in early 20th-century Italian high schools, offering a novel approach to teaching human biological diversity through busts and accompanying posters. The teaching of Ethno-Anthropological Sciences even to students who were not yet at university was the result of a cultural movement born with the continental travels of explorers and scholars in the second half of the 19th century.

Keywords: Anthropology - Ethnographic - Collections - Museology

Introduction

Between the 19th and 20th centuries, the concept of education, and thus of schooling, changed radically. Although very slowly, recent Enlightenment movements, combined with the educational needs arising from societal changes, brought schools and teaching to the forefront of the cultural debate. During the early 20th century in Europe, the two world wars and pervasive political ideologies emphasized the importance of educating children from school age. Gradually, schooling became not an elitist privilege, but a service guaranteed to all. Over the years, the age of compulsory education increased, and illiteracy among young people of all social classes decreased. The pedagogy of the time also envisioned a more dynamic and interactive school, in which objects, visual tools and material culture increasingly assumed an educational function^{1,2}.

Over the years, the age of compulsory education increased, and illiteracy among young people of all social classes decreased. The pedagogy of the time also envisioned a more dynamic and interactive school. Teaching methods reflected the modernity that society was heading towards.

In the 19th and 20th centuries, schools introduced into their curricula the historical and scientific evidence derived from recent discoveries. Indeed, explorations, commercial exchanges, and colonizations brought Europe into contact with unknown populations and new territories. Introducing these discoveries into school curricula was the natural development of this scientific knowledge.

In the second half of the 19th century, voyages of exploration generated a growing interest in the study of distant peoples and civilizations. The Musée de l'Homme in Paris preserves busts that reproduce the different human types, mannequins that show typical clothes, masks, sets of spears and other ethnographic and anthropological finds that overseas missions brought back to France³.

In Italy, the Museum of Anthropology and Ethnography of Florence preserves anthropological finds collected during anthropological and ethnographic missions in the nineteenth century. The first nucleus of the collection dates back to 1885 and testifies to anthropological research in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. The collections of the Museum of Florence include a collection of plaster facial masks, made directly on the faces of individuals⁴.

The Anthropology Museum of the University of Padua has a collection of polychrome plaster facial casts made by the Florentine anthropologist Lidio Cipriani.

The collection that arrived in Padua in 1936 includes 106 casts, mostly from African populations⁵.

The Anthropology Museum of the Natural and Physical Sciences Museum Center of the University of Naples has also undertaken work for several years to study, reconsider and rediscover its archaeological and ethnographic heritage collected between the end of the nineteenth century and the beginning of the twentieth century. The Museum displays a collection of facial masks collected in the late nineteenth century and early twentieth century⁶.

The teaching methods to illustrate the variability of human populations, their origins, customs, and traditions, were mainly based on observing various ethnographic types through the use of prints, coloured plates, and small ethnographic busts, depicting in detail the human populations. These small busts, with exquisite craftsmanship, were educational models probably reproduced based on ethnographic masks that anthropologists made directly from the faces of indigenous people during exploration campaigns. In Italian schools, the supports for ethno-anthropological teaching were provided by various companies highly specialized in the production and distribution of all teaching tools. One of these was G.B. PARAVIA & C., a historic publishing and printing house in Turin, founded in the 1600s and dedicated mainly to pedagogical dissemination. This is the company to refer to regarding the anthropological teaching method, as all their historical catalogues, including those for natural science teaching aids, are easily accessible online. Comparable tendencies can be identified in other European educational systems, where private companies and specialized publishers contributed to the circulation of ethnographic and anthropological teaching materials. This parallel development indicates that the Italian experience was part of a wider educational landscape in which commercial and pedagogical interests often intersected.

The company's headquarters in Turin ensured that, each year before the start of the school term, various catalogues were sent to all schools, specifically addressed to 'Esteemed Directors and Teachers'. These catalogues listed all the educational materials offered by the company, accompanied by brief descriptions and corresponding prices.

Over the years, the range of teaching materials for scientific subjects became more diversified, with increasingly detailed descriptions and illustrated product sheets.

In particular, two similar catalogues were taken as references, one dated 1917⁷ and the other 1933⁸, both specific to natural sciences. The topics within the catalogue are similar. However, the 1933 catalog has a more organized structure. There is a very detailed index of categories, in which the material is divided according to its purpose. This makes consultation much simpler and more intuitive. The first section is "ANTHROPOLOGY - ETHNOGRAPHY – HYGIENE".

This section included models of the human body, anatomical charts, illustrative prints on hygiene and prevention procedures, as well as ethnographic prints and busts, the subject of this research.

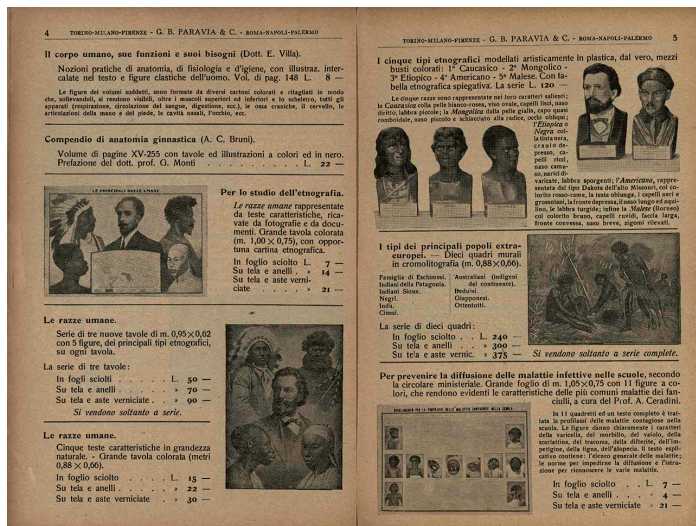


Fig. 1. Excerpt from the Catalog of Teaching Aids for the Instruction of Natural Sciences, Paravia, 1932, p.4-5.

From the 1932 catalogue, published during the Fascist regime, several peculiar characteristics are evident, highlighting the importance given not only to school education but also to the direction in which education was to be oriented (Fig. 1).

In the catalog's introduction letter, the authors emphasize the Italian origin of the material and craftsmanship, which "does not fear comparison with foreign material", a clear reference to nationalist fervor. The statuettes of the five ethnographic types are always represented here as male individuals. Next to the images are detailed descriptions of the plastic representation of the five human populations in their salient physical characteristics, faithfully reproduced along with their typical clothing. A similar description is also provided for the prints and illustrative plates of the main human populations.

Arnoldo Mondadori began his publishing activity during the early years of the twentieth century, giving rise to an increasingly important and culturally significant publishing entity. Among the sectors most affected by the publishing thrust was certainly that of childhood. Over the years, indeed, Arnoldo Mondadori Editore dealt with disseminating books, pocketbooks, collections for children, cultural insights suitable for a school-age audience, alongside the production of textbooks and encyclopedias. This is also the period when material for educational aids, including the ethnographic busts of interest for this research, was produced.

The historical catalogues of books and materials from A. Mondadori are not available online but only by appointment at the headquarters of the Mondadori Foundation in Milan. For this reason, dating the ethnographic types, despite the certainty of Mondadori production, remains approximate, adhering to the years bracket (1917-1933) indicated by the catalogues of G. B. Paravia & C. It would certainly be interesting to conduct further research in this regard, as historical catalogs are physically available for consultation.

The historical ethnographic collections of the University Museum of Chieti

At the University Museum of Chieti, two collections of these educational ethnographic busts are preserved, along with a print on the main human populations.

The old catalogs of G. B. Paravia & C. for teaching supports are among the very few sources available to date the school material present at the University Museum. In fact, although the examined material cannot be attributed to the Paravia company, through these catalogs, which show similar products, it is possible to estimate at least the time range in which these educational supports were used, namely the first half of the 20th century and their significance.

Other sources on this type of material are scarce.

The two collections of ethnographic types at the University Museum of Chieti are displayed together in a dedicated showcase, although they show substantial differences. One of the two collections, donated by the S. Pio X Regional Pontifical Seminary in 2013, consists of five ethnographic types (Fig. 2). This is the most common breakdown for describing the various human populations at a school level and beyond.

The statuettes are half-bust, each about 30 cm tall. They are made of plaster, with a matte finish, finely modeled and coloured. The somatic features of male individuals from different geographic regions have been faithfully reproduced.

The busts in this collection, despite being explanatory thanks to the skilled craftsmanship, lack any type of denomination or label that presents not only the name of the human population but also a brief explanatory caption.

The only clues found on the statuettes are the stamp of the manufacturing company, placed under the base, A. Mondadori Verona, and, on the back, present only on some statuettes, an engraving that appears to be Gio Balto, in cursive, probably the signature of the craftsman, although searches on this name have not produced results.

The second collection, on the other hand, was donated to the Museum by the F. Masci State Scientific High School in the city of Chieti in 2018 and consists of 8 statuettes, approximately 25 cm tall, made of plaster (Fig. 3).



Fig. 2. Five busts donated by the S. Pio X Regional Pontifical Seminary, Chieti



Fig. 3. Eight busts donated by the F. Masci State Scientific High School , Chieti

The statuettes all represent only male individuals, each with his own characteristics, while the bust, in each ethnographic type, is of the same skin colour as the face but smooth and straight, a simple support for the statuette.

At the base of the busts in this collection are white labels, each bearing the name of the populations for each statuette. The only one without it, due to reasons related to wear and tear, is the statuette presumably referring to the Malay type.

In this case, too, there are no additional descriptive captions.

Compared to the A. Mondadori collection, these ethnographic types are slightly smaller, modelled less finely, and the overall stylistic rendering appears less refined, though not coarse.

There are no stamps, engravings, or labels attributable to a brand or manufacturing company.

From the historical inventory records of the Scientific Cabinet of the F. Masci State Scientific High School, also preserved by the University Museum since the material was donated in 2018, there is no evidence of the presence of these ethnographic busts. The absence of the historical inventory number, together with the absence of a trademark, makes it impossible to establish with certainty a production or distribution date. Even the G. B. Paravia & C. catalogs, in this case, are of little help, given the marked stylistic difference of this collection compared to the Mondadori one or the one shown in the Paravia catalogues.

Another significant element of the collection on educational ethno-anthropology at the University Museum of Chieti is an old print on human populations.

Prints of this type were usually offered, always from catalogs, in various sizes, suitable for hanging in classrooms, permanently.

They consisted of summary diagrams and images, suitable for school teaching methodology.

Evidence of similar visual pedagogical practices is preserved in major European museum and educational archives, including the Musée national de l'Éducation in

Rouen⁹ and the Pitt Rivers Museum in Oxford¹⁰, whose collections of ethnographic charts and teaching images reflect the broader circulation of anthropological visual aids in modern schooling.

The print exhibited at the University Museum of Chieti was also donated by the State F. Masci Scientific High School in 2018 and was produced by Antonio Vallardi, Editor ~ Roma ~ Milano ~ Napoli, a company established in 1843, derived from Fratelli Vallardi of 1812. In this case too, the production mainly concerned educational materials, children's literature, and geographical atlases.

Historical catalogues are not available online, so once again, the G. B. Paravia & C. catalogs will serve as a temporal and descriptive reference.

This educational print is a colored canvas wall chart, measuring 65x92 cm, and is displayed in a glass frame with a rear support (Fig. 4). There are still holes at the four corners for hanging and stretching the print.

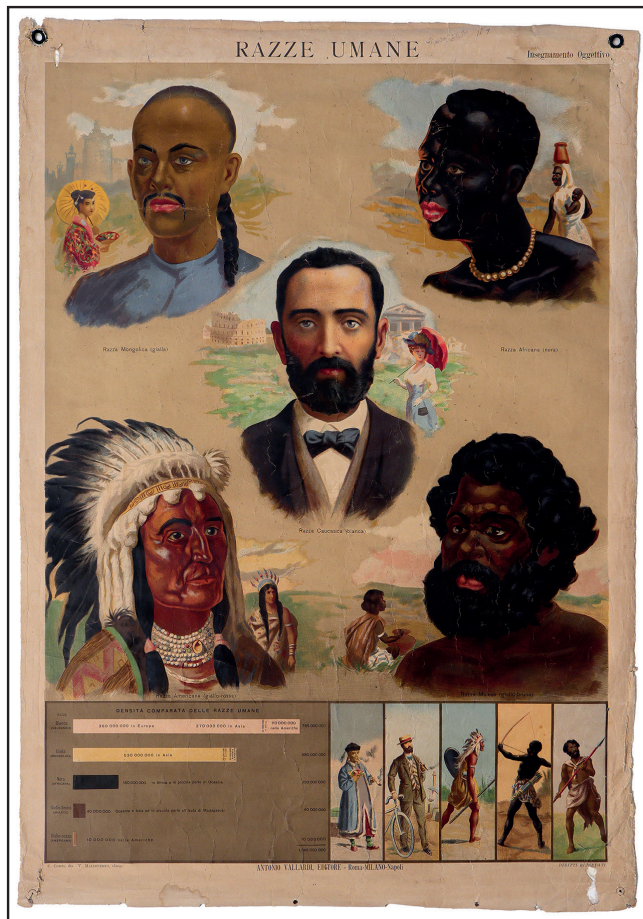


Fig. 4. The educational print donated by the F. Masci State Scientific High School, Chieti

The title of the print is “Human Races”, and it features five ethnographic types depicted as colored, skilfully drawn male half-busts. Each figure is shown wearing typical clothing and is set against a background that includes, in reduced scale, a landscape representing their region of origin, along with a corresponding female figure dressed in traditional attire.

At the bottom of the print is a simple bar graph titled “Comparative Density of Human Races”, which indicates, based on the entire world population, the population density for each population and their distribution on the various continents.

Next to the graph is a full-figure representation of the five human groups, each with their typical clothing and characteristic everyday objects.

Brief captions below the back edge of the print indicate the brand, copyright, and two names: C. Corti, the designer, and V. Malinverno, the lithographer.

The exhibition of this print at the F. Masci State Scientific High School in Chieti is evidenced by its presence in the school’s historical inventory records. The dating is always approximate, but the date on which the print first appears in the register lists can be established with certainty, June 7, 1946.

The date is relative because it is not possible to establish how long the print had been owned by the high school, as the previous lists are incomplete. However, a production time frame can be established again thanks to the G. B. Paravia & C. catalogues and, in this case, also through a more detailed historical analysis.

Discussion

On the basis of the bibliographic research carried out, in Italy there is only one collection of wax busts which represent the main human groupings identified as described by Blumenbach at the end of the eighteenth century: Caucasian, Melanic or Ethiopian, Tartarian-Sinic or Mongolian, Malayan-Polynesian or Malaysian and American. The collection dates back to the second half of the 19th century and is preserved at the Ethnographic-Anthropological Museum of the University of Modena and Reggio Emilia. However, it is a collection that constituted demonstrative support for the anthropometric and morphological studies carried out by Prof. Paolo Gaddi (1806-1871) on skulls and plaster casts of skulls belonging to individuals of various populations¹¹. The collections of the Museum of Anthropology at Sapienza University of Rome, particularly the G. Sergi collection of facial casts and skeletal remains, provide a unique window into historical approaches to physical anthropology and ethnography^{12,13,14}. These materials, assembled in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, not only served scientific and educational purposes but also reflected broader cultural and colonial contexts. Recent studies have emphasized the importance of conservation and critical reassessment of these collections, highlighting their dual role as both research tools and cultural heritage artifacts¹⁵. Through a careful analysis of such collections, scholars can reconstruct the history of anthropological practice, understand past peda-

gological strategies, and critically engage with the ethical and interpretive challenges of displaying human remains and ethnographic representations.

The collection of busts preserved at the University Museum of Chieti remains the only one coming from a school attended by young students.

Although facial masks constitute a historical and ethnographic heritage collected by scholars during their exploratory journeys with the aim of studying and making known the populations and cultures of the different geographical areas, they remain confined to museums and universities and are mainly accessible, if not exclusively, to scientists and researchers.

Plaster busts, like those exhibited in the Chieti Museum, have brought knowledge of human populations directly into schools since the early years of the twentieth century. Anthropology and ethnography become part of school curricula.

Conclusions

This study has examined the use of scientific and ethnographic teaching materials in Italian high schools between the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, focusing on two key collections of models, busts, and graphic resources. By analyzing their content, dating, and production contexts, the research has highlighted how these materials functioned both as pedagogical tools and as instruments for conveying anthropological knowledge. The two collections of ethnographic busts and the illustrative chart offered students visual representations of human diversity, while reflecting broader social and political perspectives of their time. The findings underscore the dual role of these materials: they facilitated objective transmission of scientific and cultural knowledge, while also embedding contemporary ideological frameworks. Ultimately, this study demonstrates that historical teaching resources were not merely didactic objects but also mediators of cultural understanding, shaping how generations of students engaged with populations and societies that were largely unfamiliar to them.

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