

Faces from colonial times: the collection of facial casts at the Sapienza University of Rome (Museum of Anthropology “G. Sergi”)

Maria Chiara Verducci¹, Silvia Soncin², Maria Luana Belli³, Elisabetta Aloisi Masella², Giacomo Macola¹ & Giorgio Manzi²

1) Dipartimento di Storia, Antropologia, Religioni, Arte e Spettacolo, Sapienza Università di Roma, Italy

2) Dipartimento di Biologia Ambientale, Sapienza Università di Roma, Italy

e-mail: silvia.soncin@uniroma1.it, giorgio.manzi@uniroma1.it

3) Istituto Italiano di Paleontologia Umana, Anagni, FR, Italy

Summary - Founded in 1894, the Museum “G. Sergi” houses a variety of osteological materials and other collections, including several plaster facial casts from different human populations. This paper investigates this collection, which has been acquired (at least in part) in the framework of Italian colonialism, focusing on expeditions respectively led by Lidio Cipriani and Corrado Gini during the fascist regime. By examining these casts and the colonial missions associated with them, we compare the goals of Cipriani and Gini, uncovering the otherwise forgotten history of these collections, and provide new insights from the perspective of the colonized. While Gini’s records include the names of local actors, Cipriani’s documentation identifies individuals in only one notable case, that of the “Arabi dello Yemen”, a group of Yemenis about to join the Italian askari forces. Globally, many museums are re-evaluating similar samples and it is in this framework that we present these case-studies. In addition, as a collaborative effort by researchers from different fields, this paper aims to contribute to the ongoing discussion about how human facial casts should be displayed in museums.

Keywords - Anthropology, Plaster casts, Colonialism, Museums, Italy.

Introduction

The personality and academic history of Italian anthropologist Giuseppe Sergi have been recently re-examined by G. Cerro (2024; see also Mucciarelli 1987; Puccini 1991, 1993). He was a pivotal figure of Italian positivism and among the pioneers of both psychology and anthropology in Italy, at the time of its unification. In 1884, he established the Chair of Anthropology at the University of Rome (now Sapienza University of Rome), with an adjoining museum that he and his successors further developed over the subsequent decades. A century later (1994), the museum was renamed *Museo di Antropologia Giuseppe Sergi* (in the following pages, we will refer to it as the “Sergi Museum” or, more simply, as the “Museum”). Originally conceived as a research centre for scholars, the Sergi Museum rapidly expanded its

collections and increased access for the scientific community of biological anthropologists. It was relocated multiple times, for many years it was inside the historical *Collegio dei Gesuiti*: the so-called “Roman College”, established in the centre of Rome by St. Ignatius of Loyola in 1551. Finally, in January 1938, the Museum was moved to a dedicated building within the new campus of the Sapienza University of Rome, known as *Studium Urbis* (Sergi 1939).

At the turn of the 19th and 20th centuries, the Museum built up an extensive corpus of human samples – mostly skeletal, cranial in particular – from all around the world, along with various other items (Soncin et al. 2017). Because of the variety and importance of its collections, the Museum quickly became an academic reference point across Europe. Nowadays, the Museum continues to host a rich archive of osteological,

instrumental and ethnographic findings, including an extensive assemblage of ca. 500 plaster casts. These casts were recently re-evaluated as part of a comprehensive project aimed to recover, analyse and digitise the materials preserved in the Museum. Here we present the assemblage of these plaster casts, with a focus on collections linked to the Italian colonial past.

The history of plaster casts

The practice of casting people's faces has deep historical roots, going from Egyptian and Roman funerary masks, which held memorial value, to the fashion of European aristocrats in the 1700s. It is only from the nineteenth century to the mid-twentieth century that this practice began to have a scientific application within the context of phrenological studies, playing a key role in the identification of the so-called "human types" (Isaac and Colebank 2022) and the exploration of the supposed link between somatic traits and social behaviours, both normal and pathological (Distretti 2014). For this reason, they were easily adapted to the context of colonial scientific research. However, the validity of this practice was later dismissed, and, because of their lack of scientific significance, plaster casts were relegated to museums storage across Europe (Lai 2023).

Today, however, researchers are rediscovering these overlooked collections, often linked to a colonial origin, seeking to uncover their creators and affiliated institutions, as well as to reassess their significance in contemporary society (e.g., Sysling 2015; Piccioni 2022; Isaac and Colebank 2022; Begerock et al. 2023; Howes and Tocha 2023; Mazzucchelli 2023; Nicolosi et al. 2024). These artifacts were used and exchanged among scholars as objects of study and displayed within major European museums and exhibitions: in this way, plaster casts contributed through their circulation, to convey the typification and classification of human beings into social hierarchies (Sysling 2015). The frowning expressions frequently captured in plaster casts suggest that this practice was not pleasant, which is confirmed by the few testimonies that can be consulted. For instance, a Namibian participant described his

experience with German anthropologist Hans Lichtenecker (1891-1988), who created plaster casts of faces and hands in 1931. He spoke of intense discomfort, sweating, and breathing difficulties for up to thirty minutes—an insight that vividly illustrates how indigenous people perceived this intrusive practice (Hoffmann 2015). Through time, facial casts acquired new meanings: no longer just tools of scientific classification, they have become objects of memory, imbued with ethical and symbolic significance (Mazzucchelli 2023).

In light of the international debate about the colonial heritage (e.g., Clifford 1997; Dias 2007; Bragard 2011; Sarr and Savoy 2018), we recognise the need to contextualise and present the collection of plaster casts housed in the Sergi Museum.

Collections of facial casts at the Sergi Museum

During a systematic re-examination of the materials stored in the Sergi Museum's drawers and cabinets, approximately 500 plaster casts were recorded. Many, though not all, of them were accompanied by such relevant information as the population group to which they belonged, hand-written notes, production numbers, and, in some cases, personal names. A comprehensive project was launched to compare these casts with photographic archives available online and catalogues from other museums. The aim of the exercise was to accurately assign them to their respective collections. This investigation revealed that the plaster casts of the Sergi Museum belong to different historical periods and were obtained from a variety of ethnic groups from several missions around the globe. For example, the oldest collections consist of a small group (n=21) of uncoloured facial casts produced in 1890-1891 by Elio Modigliani from the indigenous people of the islands of Sumatra and Engano (Modigliani 1892, 1894), and of a substantial number (n=94) of plaster busts made during the expeditions of the German anthropologist Frederick Starr between 1896 and 1901 among

indigenous communities of Mexico (Starr 1908). Here, we will focus on the plaster casts made by the anthropologist Lidio Cipriani and by the demographer Corrado Gini during the Italian colonial period.

Lidio Cipriani

The Sergi Museum houses approximately 150 facial casts made by the anthropologist and ethnologist Lidio Cipriani (1892-1962), during his missions in Africa and elsewhere. The academic and scientific career of Lidio Cipriani paralleled the political events of his time. His first anthropological missions from 1927-1931 focused on Yemen, southern Africa and Congo, while between 1932 and 1933, Cipriani studied the Tuareg, Tebu and Dauada populations in the territory of Fezzan, Libya. Later, in 1936 and then again between 1938 and 1939, he shifted his attention to the newly conquered Ethiopia, where he studied the communities around Lake Tana. It is during these expeditions that thousands of photographs, numerous boxes of paleoanthropological material, human skeletal remains, botanical and zoological samples, as well as facial casts were collected (Tacchetto 2018). His close connection with the regime gave him solid bases to be able to assert himself as a respected anthropologist and scholar (Cavarocchi 2000): this will be fully confirmed in 1938, when he signed the *Manifesto della Razza* (Manifesto of Race) and joined the editorial board of the periodical *La difesa della razza* directed by Telesio Interlandi. Two years later, however, administrative investigations led to the dismissal of Cipriani from academia (Cassata 2008).

The historical catalogue of the Sergi Museum notes that copies of 46 facial casts from the missions conducted by Lidio Cipriani were acquired in 1942. We attributed the remaining casts to Cipriani by comparison with other catalogues from other Italian museums. Here we focus on four subsets created during expeditions to the Italian colonies. These are particularly significant since they illuminate the densely interwoven relationship between Italian anthropology and the country's colonial pursuits.



Fig. 1 - Plaster cast of "Abissino" made by Lidio Cipriani during the expedition to Lake Tana.

The expedition to Lake Tana. The expedition to Lake Tana was conceived in late autumn 1936 by the *Centro Studi per l'Africa Orientale Italiana* (AOI), within the *Accademia d'Italia* coordinated by Giotto Dainelli. It was the most important Italian scientific expedition to Ethiopia in the second half of the 1930s (Dore 1992). Lidio Cipriani joined the mission as anthropologist. In the volume he wrote upon his return (1941), he reports that 890 anthropological and anthropometric records of individuals belonging to local peoples were produced. Among these, he took about 3000 photographs and 63 facial models. Some of the latter are to be found at the Sergi Museum, including: 2 casts of Abissini, 2 casts of Camanti, 3 casts of Etiopi, 3 casts of Baria, 2 casts of Ben Amer (Fig. 1), 1 cast of Cunama, 2 casts of Falascia and 2 casts of Nuer.

In the volume describing the expedition, Cipriani compares the physical and somatic characteristics of various ethnic groups, searching for common traits. In the introduction, he emphasises the value of plaster casts, describing them as "scientific documents of the first order, preferable to any metric data or photographs" (our translation, Cipriani 1941, p. 8). While acknowledging the challenges involved in obtaining these casts "among peoples who had



Fig. 2 - Plaster cast of "Borana" made by Lidio Cipriani for the Mostra delle Terre d'Oltremare.

been subjected to our rule for only a few months, where any mistake risked being misinterpreted", the anthropologist nonetheless contended that the numerous facial models created during the missions served as evidence of "the trust we inspire in our new African subjects" (our translation, [Cipriani 1941](#), p. 8).

In May 1936, Mussolini had officially proclaimed the establishment of the "empire." At that time, the Ethiopian government had not yet surrendered, and most of the plateau had not yet been conquered. From the outset, indeed, the Abyssinians organised a very effective resistance to the Italian invasion, which kept the Italian army fully engaged throughout the occupation ([Pankhurst 1993](#)). The main resistance was in Shewa, Gojjam and Begemder, precisely the areas where the anthropological mission to Lake Tana found itself operating between 1936 and 1940 ([Cipriani 1941](#), p. 7). It is therefore conceivable that, precisely because of the peculiar situation obtaining on the ground, the "trust" of which Cipriani spoke had more to do with fear than with a genuine willingness to cooperate on the part of the Abyssinians. By virtue of the data and objects collected, the mission produced, in the words of [Giovanni Dore](#), "the most complete

and systematic ethnographic collection of material culture in Italian Africa" ([1992](#), p. 47).

The exhibition *Mostra Triennale delle Terre Italiane d'Oltremare*. The Lake Tana collection was later showcased at one of the largest colonial exhibitions of the fascist regime, the *Mostra Triennale delle Terre Italiane d'Oltremare* (Triennial Exhibition of Italian Overseas Territories). Additional plaster casts which were displayed at this exhibition are now housed at the Sergi Museum, as suggested by accompanying notes.

The exhibition was inaugurated in 1940 in Naples. A clear example of fascist propaganda, this was intended to promote the newly established "empire" and its expansionist ambitions ([Dore 1992](#)). In preparation for the exhibition, in addition to the casts produced in 1936, Cipriani embarked on a new mission to the Galla and Sidama regions of Ethiopia, where he made 59 additional casts. These, along with other specimens from Somalia, Libya, and Eritrea, were displayed in the pavilion dedicated to Italian East Africa. Presented alongside portraits of Mussolini and other figures from Italian history, the display had the effect of highlighting perceived physical and moral differences between the conquered and the conquerors ([Piccioni 2022](#)). The Sergi Museum houses 13 facial casts related to this exhibition, in particular: 2 casts of Raschida, 1 cast of Etiopie Mao, 1 cast of Etiopie Berta, 1 cast of Etiopie, 2 casts of Dancali and Dancalo Adal, 1 cast of For, 1 cast of Borana (Fig. 2) and 4 casts of Sidamo, Somalo, Somalo Averghedir Sa'ad and Somalo Ogaden.

The mission for the *Centro di Studi Coloniali*. The *Centro di Studi Coloniali* (Colonial Studies Centre) was established in Florence in 1931 with the aim of promoting statistical, economic, and demographic research on the Italian colonies ([Malgeri 2017](#)). In this context, a mission was organised in collaboration with the National Research Council (*Consiglio Nazionale delle Ricerche*, CNR) and entrusted to Cipriani in 1937 to conduct anthropological research on the Eritrean populations living to the north of Cheren. The accompanying notes

suggest that the following casts, housed in the Sergi Museum, were created on this occasion: 3 casts of Abissino Anseba, Ad tekles Tigrè, Ad Temariam, 4 casts of Etiopie, 4 casts including 1 Etiopie Betguik, 1 Etiopie Bilenò, 2 Etiopie Bilenò Taquè-Tigrè, 1 cast of Etiopie Mensa, 1 cast of Habab Semimagalli (Fig. 3) and 1 cast of Semimagalli.

The case of the *Arabi dello Yemen*, or the askari collection. This unique collection includes a group of plaster casts made by Cipriani in 1927, during an unexpected encounter between the anthropologist and a group of Yemeni askaris (the colonial soldiers recruited by Italy also included Eritreans, Somalis, Ethiopians, and Berbers) who were being enlisted into the Italian colonial troops (Cipriani 1927). According to Cipriani, the process of casting these soldiers was not easy. His initial attempt to collect data from Yemeni soldiers was met with resistance and threats of immediate expulsion, as it violated a Qur'anic prohibition against capturing human images. Therefore, when he found an entire battalion aboard the same ship as him in Aden in April 1927, he probably took the opportunity to measure and create plaster casts of them (Cipriani 1932a).

Fourteen plaster casts of the future askaris are held in the Sergi Museum. By cross-referencing the names with the corresponding age and biological sex indicators given by Cipriani (1932a), and by comparing and examining any similarities between the photographs taken by Cipriani and the facial casts preserved in the Museum, it proved possible to propose several attributions, assigning personal names to many of them (Fig. 4).

Cipriani's decision to list down the names of the askaris, while ignoring those of other individuals, is a particularly significant detail, as it indirectly supports the argument presented in at least one of his reports (Cipriani 1936). This work posits that Africans were valued and deemed worthy of appreciation only through their enlistment in the Italian army and/or their recognition of colonial subjugation. Indeed, according to Cipriani, indigenous soldiers were "useful" based on their "psychic potential and adequate preparation" (our translation, Cipriani 1936, p. 215).



Fig. 3 - Plaster cast of "Habab Semimagalli" made by Lidio Cipriani during the mission for the Centro di Studi Coloniali.

Corrado Gini

Corrado Gini (1884-1965) was an Italian statistician, demographer and sociologist, renowned for his contributions to social and economic statistics. Throughout his career, Gini explored topics related to population dynamics, economic development and social phenomena. During the fascist regime, he applied his expertise to further the regime's objectives, most notably through the establishment of the *Comitato Italiano per lo Studio dei Problemi della Popolazione* (CISP; Italian Committee for the Study of Population Problems) (Cassata 2006).

Founded in Rome in 1928, CISP was highly endorsed by Mussolini, who, under the guidance of Gini, issued a directive to ministries and public institutions to build a comprehensive network for funding scientific studies on population issues (Cassata 2006). CISP adopted a holistic approach to studying population problems, emphasizing interdisciplinary. This sets Gini's work apart from Cipriani's facial casts, as will be discussed later. His expeditions include those to the Dauada of Tripolitania, the *Samaritani* of Palestine, the *Messicani* ethnic groups, the *Caraimi* of Poland and Lithuania, the Bantu of South Africa, the *Berberi di Giado*, but also among the so-called



Fig. 4 - Plaster cast of "Arabo dello Yemen" made by Lidio Cipriani, who reported also photos of the subject that we decided not to publish in order to respect post mortem privacy of this specific individual.



Fig. 5 - Plaster cast of "Dauada" made during the CISP expedition led by Corrado Gini.

Italian "ethnic islands" as the *Albanesi in Calabria* and the *Liguro-Piemontesi* of Carloforte and Calasetta in Sardinia (Cassata 2006).

In those occasions when the CISP's work was introduced to the international scientific community, Gini proposed that his cyclical theory of nations would benefit from the study of primitive populations. This also constituted the foundation of his approach to eugenics, particularly

focusing on the "revitalizing" benefits of interbreeding and the dysgenic consequences of demographic isolation (Cassata 2006, p. 134).

The Museum houses approximately 80 facial casts made during CISP's missions. Although definitive attribution is challenging, due to the incomplete nature of the records available in the Museum's historical catalogue, the evidence strongly supports this conclusion: each cast is labelled with a personal name, population group, age, biological sex, and aligns with the populations and numbers reported by Gini in his publications. Here we focus on the collections of Dauada plaster casts and those of the *Berberi di Giado*.

The Dauada collection. A case of "demographic isolation" (Gini 1936, p. 60) in the Italian colonies is represented by the Dauada of Fezzan. The study was conducted during two expeditions, the first in 1933 and the second in January-February 1935, and saw the participation, along with Lidio Cipriani, of both Sergio Sergi, son of Giuseppe Sergi and director of the Institute of Anthropology and its Museum, and the younger scholar Giuseppe Genna, who would later succeed Sergio Sergi in the direction.

The team visited three Dauada villages: Gabr'on, Truna and Mandara, located at various points along the shores of Lake Bahar-ed-Dud (Gini 1936). The initial 1933 expedition was exploratory and required further investigation in 1935, during which additional data were gathered beyond demographic information, including anthropological, biological, and health-related data and involving the collection of haemoglobin and blood group data, the measurement of basal metabolism, and the documentation of physical characteristics through photographs, palm and footprint records, and plaster casts (Gini 1936). The expedition team was led by Gini as director, with Giovanni Cirillo overseeing the making of plaster casts, and with the participation of Nora Federici, Dino Camavitto, and Giacomo Leo as well. The surveys were conducted with the full cooperation of the colonial administration, as noted by Gini, who specifically expressed his gratitude in his report to Italo

Balbo, Marshal and Governor of Tripolitania, as well as to the commanders of the local presidium (Gini 1936, p. 61).

The colonial context emerges also in the descriptions of the population's habits: in 1933, people appeared to be dressed in rugs, whereas, by 1935, their clothing had noticeably improved to new barracanos, a "progress" – according to Gini – that reflected "the improved economic conditions of the population, for which the natives unanimously give credit to the Italian government" (our translation, Gini 1937, p. 249-250). The Museum stores 23 facial casts related to this population, divided into 16 casts for the Dauada di Gabr'On, 5 for the Dauada di Mandara and 2 for the Dauada di Truna (Fig. 5).

The collection of the *Berberi di Giado*. In the late 1930s, Gini experienced a gradual marginalization within Mussolini's circle. At the eugenic and demographic level, the Italian regime began to favour the more Germanophile and National Socialist stance represented by Livio Livi, who headed the newly established Committee for the Consultation of Population Studies in 1937; this committee emerged in opposition to the similarly named committee chaired by Gini (Cassata 2006).

Around this time, Gini became involved in an exploration among the *Berberi di Giado*, in Libya, between September and October 1937, driven by his interest in the distinctive blondism observed among these people (Federici 1942). Gini oversaw the collection of genealogical data on individual families and the gathering of ethnographic information, while Carmela Giordanella, a nurse at the indigenous hospital in Tripoli, handled data collection from women. The Libyan government provided logistical support, including a car for transporting participants and a truck for scientific materials. The research yielded 124 demographic questionnaires, 404 anthropometric forms, and 362 medical-biological form. Additionally, four plaster casts of males aged 21 to 28 were made, with examinations of eye and hair colour (Federici 1942) (Fig. 6). There is no evidence that Lidio Cipriani, Sergio Sergi, or Giuseppe Genna were involved in this expedition.



Fig. 6 - Plaster cast of "Berbero di Giado" made during the CISP expedition led by Corrado Gini.

The four plaster casts display a unique characteristic compared to others. They all have painted eyes, which were likely added later, given their lack of realism (Fig. 6). This stylistic choice may have originally aimed at emphasizing the blue eye color, reflecting the interest in the Berbers' blond features. However, if this is the case, the final effect is incongruent, as the depicted hair and eyes are brown, casting doubt on this interpretation. The reason behind this artistic decision remains unclear due to insufficient evidence.

Differences and similarities between Cipriani's and Gini's intents

In 1937 the regime took an increasingly racist turn, moving towards the adoption of segregationist policies even within the colonies. From this point on, positions on "hybridity" hardened. In the past, crossbreeding was considered inevitable and/or "tolerated" as a function of demographic vitalism; now, however, on the eve of the racial laws, no more contamination would be allowed (Sòrgoni 1998).

The conclusion to Cipriani's volume about his mission to Lake Tana (1941) brings to light the regime's approach to the "problem" of hybridation

and “race degeneration”: it is possible to argue that the production of at least part of his facial casts served to support the so-called Hamitic hypothesis advanced by Cipriani, the theory – that is – that posited that Egyptians, Ethiopians, and Berbers were descendants of a noble lineage (Sòrgoni 1998, p.42). However, according to Cipriani, this “noble race” had undergone a process of degeneration due to the practice of acquiring wives from so-called “inferior” races, such as the Bushmen and Pygmies (Cipriani 1932b). He believed that contemporary Ethiopians represented a remnant of this ancient, declining race, though they still retained some superior traits, such as a warlike spirit and sense of loyalty, which, in his view, made them the finest human material on the African continent and justified their inclusion in Italian colonies (Paris 2015).

The theme of genetic mixing is a common thread in the work of both Gini and Cipriani, albeit we argued approached from distinct perspectives. Already in 1932, in his preface to Cipriani’s volume (1932b), Gini acknowledged the inevitability of such mixing for the survival of “higher” races but simultaneously recognized the eventual erosion of their original traits. This perspective likely explains Gini’s focus on the study of “ethnic islands” and his emphasis on the dangers of racial isolation. It also sets his views apart from those of Cipriani, for whom racial mixture was unequivocally synonymous with decay and degeneration (Sòrgoni 1998; Cavarocchi 2000).

The facial casts made by CISP, in addition to being part of a more comprehensive survey which also pertained to the medical and health conditions of the population, present, in contrast to those made by Cipriani, the names of the individuals concerned. Gini’s approach, in this sense, would seem to be different from Cipriani’s. This is very clear when we consider the case of Cipriani’s askaris, who were probably only recognised for their contribution to the Italian army. At the same time, however, both Cipriani and Gini were actively working within the colonial context and with the idea of species improvement, sharing eugenic assumptions and the fascist perspective.

The musealisation of facial plaster casts: challenges and opportunities

Recently, there has been a growing interest in re-evaluating the significance of anthropological heritage, including plaster casts. Worldwide museums are adopting different approaches. A notable example is the display of plaster casts at the Musée de l’Homme in Paris, France. Since 2015, the museum has presented a collection of busts as part of an immersive exhibition that explores human evolution. Entitled “Qui sommes-nous?, D’où venons-nous? and Où allons-nous?” (Who are we? Where do we come from? Where are we going?), the exhibit emphasises biological variability and human history (Cailloce 2015). A similar approach has been adopted by the Anthropology and Ethnology section of the Natural History Museum of the University of Florence. In this case, a selection of plaster casts is displayed alongside distorting mirrors, which allow visitors to see themselves in altered forms, highlighting the subjective lens through which human diversity is perceived. The installation challenges the concept of human classification, emphasising that the notion of “race” lacks biological validity (Zavattaro et al. 2011). A similar approach was adopted by the University of Padua (Scaggion and Carrara 2015) and by the University of Naples in two temporary exhibitions that were proposed in 2015 and 2019, respectively (Mazzucchelli 2023). It should be noted however, that these types of display are not always well-received by the direct descendants of the individuals represented due to the lack of explicitness about the relationship that bound colonized and colonizer (Contini 2019). Recently, it has also been revealed that a key photograph often reported in these academic contexts—showing Lidio Cipriani moulding a plaster cast on a local individual—is actually a reconstruction made on a film set (Falcucci and Iannuzzi 2024). This revelation further emphasizes the representation of the casting experience from the perspective of the colonizer rather than that of the colonized.



Fig. 7 - *The current location of the facial casts in the section of the Sergi Museum dedicated to the conservation of the collections (not open to the public).*

Other museums are addressing the sensitive legacy of plaster casts with a focus on ethical considerations. An example is the National Museum of Natural History in Washington DC, which began a collaboration with the Osage Nation after one of its members discovered casts of several Osage individuals. This initiated ethical discussions regarding the display of the casts, with the museum now recognising the need for consent from the descendants of the communities concerned and ongoing collaboration to appropriately address these artifacts (Isaac and Colebank 2022). Moving to the Italian scenario, the facial cast collections of the Museum System of the University of Bologna and those stored at Museo delle Civiltà (MuCiv) in Rome serve as notable examples of this ongoing reflection (Mazzucchelli 2023). In particular, Nicolosi and colleagues (2024) argue that Italian museums must now recognise the ethical implications of this cultural inheritance, actively contributing to the

international debate while acknowledging their social responsibility in handling these objects.

Some researchers and curators are exploring the use of personal names on plaster casts labels, an issue which is also relevant to our collection. In fact, it has been discussed above, the presence or absence of names associated with the casts could raise searching questions about the nature of the relationship between anthropologists and local communities. Identifying the individuals behind plaster casts would provide them with a commemorative value and support efforts to connect with their descendants, thereby opening new venues of investigation (Lai 2023).

Since the early 1980s, the plaster cast collection of the Sergi Museum remains unseen by the public, stored in conservation areas, while efforts have been made to understand and address their significance (Fig. 7). Nevertheless, in the early 2000s, Jeffrey Feldman, a Professor at New York University, visited the Museum and was able to

observe them. In considering that anthropology museums in Italy are “solely used to illustrate anthropology’s history of racism”, Feldman argued that a key aspect of the relationship between Italian colonialism and material culture would need to be addressed in any future exhibition (Feldman 2006, p. 248).

The Sapienza University architectural complex in Rome stands as a vast monument to Italian rationalism built in the 1930s, during the fascist regime. It retains much of its original layout, including its celebratory mosaics and imposing architecture. What would it mean today to examine the colonial artifacts in university anthropological museums, specifically at Sapienza? We argue that such an examination should consider not only the archaeological or scientific aspects of colonial artifacts, but also address their historical and political significance, involving researchers from relevant fields and allocated fundings. While museum’s anthropologists and archaeologists possess expertise beyond colonial heritage, we are committed to re-evaluating the problems posed by such plaster casts’ collections, rather than relegating them to obscurity (Mazzucchelli 2023). We are keen to attend dedicated conferences, discuss with experts in the field and foster collaborations, in order to deepen our understanding of this complex legacy. This paper represents an initial effort towards a more comprehensive analysis of the plaster cast collections of the Sergi Museum, aligned with current scholarly directions.

Conclusions (for now)

In this paper we have illustrated facial plaster casts’ collections of the Sergi Museum (the Museum of Anthropology at the Sapienza University of Rome) that link anthropology to the Italian colonial context, namely those that emerged out from the expeditions led by Lidio Cipriani and Corrado Gini. By placing these casts within their historical contexts, we have been able to assess and compare the objectives of these two intellectual protagonists of the fascist regime.

One crucial aspect that could contribute to narrating this history from the perspective of the colonized, rather than the colonizer, is the identification of the individuals whose casts were made. For Gini, this is feasible due to the presence of names in anthropometric records. In contrast, for Cipriani, identification has been possible in only one specific case: that of the *Arabi dello Yemen*, a group of young Yemenis on the verge of enlisting as askaris in the Italian army.

The lack of a comprehensive study of the materials produced by the CISP’s expeditions is notable, and can be attributed to the partial loss of the relevant records during the Committee’s frequent relocations. At the same time, research into Cipriani’s work should continue, not least to determine whether the identification of names is limited to the askari group or if other cases exist as well. Such findings could lay the foundation for reconsidering the appropriate musealisation of these artifacts.

In recent years, anthropological museums around the world have grappled with the question of how best to display plaster casts, choosing between an “educational” approach intended to illustrate human biological diversity and a “historical-critical” approach, aimed at the decolonization of museum collections. One of the aims of this paper was in fact to contribute to the dialogue between historical research and anthropology regarding plaster casts, recognising their location at the crossroads of various disciplines.

Acknowledgements

MCV conducted the historical and archival research and wrote the paper; SS conducted the archival research, supervised the study and wrote the paper; MLB and EAM provided support to the archival research; GMa (Macola) supervised the study; GMB (Manzi) promoted this research, as part of a comprehensive re-evaluation of the Sergi Museum collections, supervised the study and wrote the paper; all authors read, provided feedback and approved the final manuscript. The authors express their sincere thanks to the editor of the Journal of Anthropological Sciences and two anonymous reviewers for their helpful suggestions.

References

- Begerock AM, Howes H, Tocha V (2023) The ethics of casts: plaster casts of skulls, faces and bodies from colonial Australia. *Artefact* 19:97-145. <https://doi.org/10.4000/artefact.14553>
- Bragard V (2011) "Indépendance!": the Belgo-Congolese dispute in the Tervuren Museum. *Human Architecture: Journal of the Sociology of Self-Knowledge* 9:93-104.
- Cailloce L (2015) L'Homme a son musée. CNRS Le journal. Available at: <https://lejournel.cnrs.fr/articles/lhomme-a-son-musee> [Accessed 13 Dec. 2024]
- Cassata F (2006) Il fascismo razionale: Corrado Gini fra scienza e politica, Carocci, Roma.
- Cassata F (2008) La Difesa della razza. Politica, ideologia e immagine del razzismo fascista, Einaudi, Torino.
- Cavarocchi F (2000) La propaganda razzista e antisemita di uno "scienziato" razzista: il caso di Lidio Cipriani. *Ital Contemp* 219:193-225.
- Cerro G (2024) Tra natura e cultura: degenerazione, eugenetica e razza in Giuseppe Sergi (1841-1936), Edizioni ETS, Pisa.
- Cipriani L (1932a) Osservazioni antropometriche su indigeni asiatici e africani, R. Bemporad e Figlio, Firenze.
- Cipriani L (1932b) Considerazioni sopra il passato e l'avvenire delle popolazioni africane, R. Bemporad e Figlio, Firenze.
- Cipriani L (1936) Un assurdo etnico: l'impero etiopico, R. Bemporad e Figlio, Firenze.
- Cipriani L (1941) Ricerche antropologiche sulle genti. In: Dainelli G (ed) *Missione di Studio al Lago Tana*, Reale accademia d'Italia, Roma.
- Clifford J (1997) Museums as contact zone. In: Clifford J (ed) *Routes: travel and translation in the late Twentieth Century*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge, p. 188-219.
- Dias N (2007) Le musée du quai Branly: une géologie. *Le Débat* 147:65-79.
- Distretti E (2014) Materialities in circulation: Italy and its colonies across time and space, PhD thesis, University of Portsmouth, Portsmouth.
- Dore G (1992) Ideologia coloniale e senso comune etnografico nella mostra delle terre italiane d'oltremare. In: Labanca N (ed) *L'Africa in vetrina: storie di musei e di esposizioni coloniali in Italia*, Pagus, Treviso, p. 47-65.
- Falcucci B, Iannuzzi LO (2024) Lidio Cipriani, Attilio Gatti, and the shooting of Siliva Zulu (1927): life and afterlife of a colonial film. *Interventions*: 1-26. <https://doi.org/10.1080/1369801X.2024.2400364>
- Feldman J F (2006) Contact points: museums and the Lost Body Problem. In: Edwards E, Gosden C, Philips R (eds) *Sensible objects: colonialism, museums and material culture*, Bloomsbury USA Academy, New York, p. 245-268.
- Federici N (1942) Le più recenti spedizioni scientifiche del CISP. *Genus* 5:119-132.
- Gini C (1936) Relazione su l'inchiesta demografica, antropologica e medico-biologica sopra i Dauada (Fezzan-Tripolitania), eseguita dal Comitato Italiano per lo studio dei problemi della popolazione (gennaio-febbraio 1935). *Genus* 2:57-75.
- Gini C (1937) Appunti sulle spedizioni scientifiche del Comitato Italiano per lo studio dei problemi della popolazione (febbraio 1933 - febbraio 1935). *Genus* 2:225-257.
- Hoffmann A (2015) Of storying and storing: 'Reading' Lichteneker's voice recordings. In: Silvester J (ed) *Re-Viewing Resistance in Namibian History*, University of Namibia Press, p. 89-104.
- Isaac G, Colebank S (2022) Anthropological face casts: Towards an ethical processing of their histories and difficult legacies of intimacy and ambiguity. *J Mater Cult* 28:324-348. <https://doi.org/10.1177/13591835221123995>
- Lai L (2023) The archive of faces and the archive of plaster; Reading anthropological facial plaster-casts taken from living individuals from the former Netherlands East Indies. *Wacana: Journal of the Humanities of Indones* 24:570-593.
- Malgeri G (2017) La nascita della «Rivista di Studi Politici Internazionali» (Firenze, 1934). *Rivista Di Studi Politici Internazionali* 84: 233-254. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/44427864>
- Mazzucchelli F (2023) Volti del colonialismo. In: Giacotti M, Marfè L, Violi P (eds) *La memoria degli oggetti*, Mimesis, Milano, p. 247-269.
- Modigliani E (1892) Tra i batacchi indipendenti, Società geografica italiana, Roma.

- Modigliani E (1894) *L'isola delle donne: viaggio ad Engano*, Hoepli, Milano.
- Mucciarelli G (ed) (1987) *Giuseppe Sergi nella storia della psicologia e dell'antropologia in Italia*, Pitagora, Bologna.
- Nicolosi T, Battilani P, Belcastro M G (2024) Exploring the current meaning of plaster face casts in museums: the case of Lidio Cipriani's facial masks at the Anthropological Collections of the University of Bologna (Italy). *Int J Herit Stud* 30:905-919. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13527258.2024.2353577>
- Pankhurst R (1993) La resistenza dei patrioti etiopici (1936-'41). In: *Lezioni di storia sul colonialismo italiano. Materiali di lavoro* 2-3/91-1'92:143-164
- Paris O (2015) *Le immagini dell'Altro. Il razzismo antinerio di Lidio Cipriani*, PhD thesis, Scuola superiore di Studi Umanistici dell'Università di Siena, Siena.
- Piccioni L (2022) Images of black faces in Italian colonialism: mobile essentialisms. *Mod Italy* 27:375-396. <https://doi.org/10.1017/mit.2022.40>
- Puccini S (ed) (1991) *L'uomo e gli uomini: scritti di antropologi italiani dell'Ottocento*, CISU, Roma.
- Puccini S (1993) *L'antropologia a Roma tra Giuseppe e Sergio Sergi*. *Rivista di Antropologia* 71:229-247.
- Sarr F, Savoy B (2018) *The restitution of African cultural heritage: toward a new relational ethics*. Ministère de la culture, Paris. Available at: https://www.about-africa.de/images/sonstiges/2018/sarr_savoy_en.pdf [Accessed 13 Dec. 2024]
- Sergi S (1939) *La Sede dell'Istituto di Antropologia dell'Università di Roma dalle sue origini al suo trasferimento nella Città Universitaria (1884-1937)*. *Rivista di Antropologia* 32:xi-xxxv.
- Scaggion C, Carrara N (2015) La collezione dei calchi facciali "Lidio Cipriani" del Museo di Antropologia dell'Università di Padova: dal restauro alla valorizzazione. *Museologia Scientifica* 9:77-82.
- Soncin S, Belli ML, Manzi G (2017) *The Museum of Anthropology at the Sapienza University*. *Nuova Museologia* 37:8-14.
- Sòrgoni B (1998) *Parole e corpi: antropologia, discorso giuridico e politiche sessuali interrazziali nella colonia Eritrea*, Liguori, Napoli.
- Starr F (1908) *In Indian Mexico: a narrative of travel and labor*, Forbes & Company, Chicago.
- Sysling F (2015) *Faces from the Netherlands Indies: plaster casts and the making of race in the early twentieth century*. *Revue d'histoire des sciences humaines* 27:89-107. <https://doi.org/10.4000/rhsh.2595>
- Tacchetto E (2018) *Lidio Cipriani: l'antropologo al servizio del Fascismo*. In: Bezzi L, Carrara N, Nebi M (eds) *Imago animi. Volti dal passato*, Comune di Cles, Cles, p. 25-27.
- Zavattaro M, Roselli MG, Valente C, et al (2011) *Il valore della diversità: suggestione estetica e coinvolgimento del pubblico sui temi della biodiversità umana*. *Museologia Scientifica Memorie* 8:201-203.

Editor, Giovanni Destro Bisol



This work is distributed under the terms of a Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial 4.0 Unported License <http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc/4.0/>