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Tracing a History of Etruscan Art Exhibitions

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Abstract

This research aims to identify and retrace the main stages of the dissemination of Etruscan civilization in the museographical field, from the formation of the first collections in archaeological museums, focusing on the considerable organization of temporary exhibitions in Italy and Europe.

The knowledge of the Etruscan civilization and its myth develops from the second half of the twentieth century, following a clear museological and museographical project that determined a conspicuous part of its flowering. In the Eighteenth century the foundations were laid for a popular development of Etruscology.

It was in the Nineteenth century that the research found its full affirmation not only in Italy but in Europe. While public museums have expanded and modified their collections, a significant intervention in the dissemination of the Etruscan myth will be carried out, from the 1950s onwards, by the copious temporary exhibitions that follow persistently until the present day.

This essay focuses in particular on temporary exhibitions that developed the diffusion of the main features of this ancient civilization since the end of the Second World War.

Etruscan art appears in collective exhibitions related only to specific themes until the Thirties, while from the Fifties it acquires its own autonomy and complexity in the wide exhibition field.

If the museums are more rooted in the territory and in the excavation sites, the temporary exhibitions allow the dissemination of the Etruscan civilization through stories that are always new and widespread in different cities. Starting from the analysis of the first expositions and installations, the essay traces some of the main stages of the most meaningful exhibitions that led to the widely acclaimed response of this civilization nowadays.

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The aim of the essay is to identify the main stages of the diffusion of Etruscan civilization in the museographical field, starting from the creation of the first collections in archaeological museums to concentrating on the considerable organization of temporary exhibitions. The knowledge of the myth of the Etruscan civilization developed from the first half of the Twentieth Century, following a clear museological and museographical project which determined a large part of its dissemination. This paper will draw special attention to temporary exhibitions as an essential category to understand changes, choices, and evolution on this topic. The aim of the research is to analyse a series of case studies which are particularly effective in extrapolating, describing and interpreting techniques and languages of expositions.

Although interest in the Etruscan civilization flourished during the Renaissance period, the trend of Etruscan art collectors witnessed considerable development in the Eighteenth Century accompanied by intense excavations and recovery of archaeological materials. Against this background, the first great popular works were written in the form of treatises accompanied by rich graphic reproductions: *De Etruria regali* by Thomas Dempster (Florence 1723), *Museum Etruscum* by Anton Francesco Gori (Florence 1737) and *Della nazione etrusca e degli Itali primitivi* by Scipione Maffei (Verona 1739). These are the first works that contain not only texts but also feature many illustrations of the finds. The first “museums”, in the literal sense of the term, seem to be those presented by Francesco Gori, the *Museum Etruscum*, the *Musei Guarnacci Antiqua Monumenta* (1744) and the *Museum Cortonense* (1750). These were real catalogues that described the archaeological treasure of the collections and excavations. Gori was also the first to visit and report on one of the first public museums that exhibited materials from local excavations during a trip to Volterra (Camporeale, 2004: 26)¹. In the same years two of the most important Academies of Tuscany were born: the Accademia Etrusca of Cortona (1727) and the *Società Colombaria* of Florence (1735) with the aim to disseminate the studies and writings on the Etruscan world. The figure of the noble abbot Mario Guarnacci emerged among the scholars. In 1738 he began some excavations near the “Portone” necropolis with his brothers Pietro and Giovanni leading to the constitution of the museum of Casa Guarnacci, organized in the two rooms on the ground floor of their palace in Piazza San Michele (the collection with the library was later moved to the Maffei Palace). The continuous discoveries and private collections created the need to gather materials and make them public in a suitably designed setting such as a museum. In 1761 Guarnacci added his own collection to canon Franceschini’s, which he had visited during his trip to Volterra, defining one of the oldest public museums in Europe: the *Museo Etrusco Guarnacci*². In the Eighteenth Century the foundations were laid for a popular development of Etruscology, but it was in the Nineteenth Century that the research became established not only in Italy but also in Europe. Many discoveries and new excavations formed the basis of the most important units of the Etruscan collections of European museums: British Museum in London³, Louvre in Paris, Hermitage Museum in Saint Petersburg, Staatliche Museen in Berlin. The *Etruscan Tombs* exhibition, particularly, played a remarkable role in the diffusion of Etruscan history in the European context. The exhibition, organized by the Campanari family in January 1837 at 121, Pall Mall in London, had a considerable success, not only because it was the first exhibition of this kind, but mainly for the curatorial choices that presented, next to the classic subdivision by types of objects, the reconstructions of the tombs with reproduced wall paintings, doors, objects hanging on the walls, and sarcophagi with lids left slightly open. An attempt was made to reconstruct the experience of the archaeologist, arousing astonishment and enthusiasm with reports of fabulous discoveries that inevitably foresaw the disappearance of dead bodies, a few minutes after the opening of the tomb, once they came into contact with the air. Although the reconstruction of environments was a fake, it is important to highlight the need to show real contexts (Swaddling, 2018). The exhibition also had repercussions in Italy where, in the same period, the Museo Granducale of Florence –

¹ The origin of the archaeological museum of Volterra dates back to 1731 following the donation by canon Franceschini of numerous Etruscan finds from the Portone necropolis. An important addition to this collection was made in 1761 by the gift of the noble prelate Mario Guarnacci. The first seat of the museum was in the current Palazzo dei Priori where it remained until 1877 when it was transferred to the present-day headquarters inside the Palazzo Desideri Targassi.

² The museum preserves important Etruscan works from Volterra and its territory that testify the evolution of the city from the Villanovan Age (IX Century BC) up to the annexation in Rome (I Century BC) and its development in the subsequent Roman imperial period. The museum is famous for its important collection of Etruscan cinerary urns.

³ We remember the role played by the Campanari family.

which later became the current Archaeological Museum of Florence –, the Gregorian Etruscan Museum⁴ and the Etruscan-Roman Museum of Perugia opened their doors. In the second half of the Nineteenth Century the excavation activities in the Etruscan necropolis became very intense (Roselle, Chiusi, Sovana, Arezzo, Orvieto, Tarquinia) and led to the birth of the first great Italian museum complexes: the Central Etruscan Museum of Florence (1870) showing Etruscan finds or exhibits from the grand-ducal collections according to a typological criterion and those coming from new discoveries according to a topographic criterion: Museo Nazionale di Villa Giulia in Rome (1889); the museum of Tarquinia, Chiusi, Perugia, Bologna and Ferrara. At the beginning of the 20th Century scientific research was completed with the birth of the first Standing Committee for Etruria (1925) that organized the first national conference on the theme and later evolved into the Institute of Etruscan and Italian Studies (1932).



Fig. 1. *Arte e Civiltà degli Etruschi* Exhibition, 1955. (Mosca Baldessari Private Archive, Milan; in process of pending in Luciano Baldessari Found, Mart, Rovereto; signature MART_AAE_scan252).

The Italian catalogue was edited by Massimo Pallottino, who declared how the results of recent discoveries and the progress of critical research on the Etruscan civilization gave rise to the desire to summarize, through an exhibition, the most important aspects of the artistic heritage that had been collected. An article by Antonio Frova published in the magazine “Werk” in 1957 contains some comments on the exhibition layout designed for the different cities: «The Etruscan exhibition was organised through various implementations [...] Those held in Zurich and The Hague were sober, clean, but a little sacrificed as to space; the exhibition in Paris at the Louvre was a model of bad taste. It seemed to bring together an exemplification of all that should never be done, an expression of an archaeological taste dating back to the last century. [...] The show of Baldessari in Milan will remain as an example of rigour and purity»⁵ (Frova 1957: 355).

⁴ The Gregorian Etruscan Museum was inaugurated in 1837. Although the arrangement was far from being definitive, both for the exhibits and for the number of rooms intended to accommodate them, it presented materials detached from the original relics, but also exhibited a reconstructed tomb.

⁵ The quotations of the texts in the original Italian language have been translated by the author.



Fig. 2. *Arte e Civiltà degli Etruschi Exhibition*, 1955, Floorplan (Luciano Baldessari Archive, Department of Design, Politecnico di Milano; signature ALB_AAE_D001).



Fig. 3. *Arte e Civiltà degli Etruschi Exhibition*, 1955 (Mosca Baldessari Private Archive, Milano; in process of pending in Luciano Baldessari Found, Mart, Rovereto; signature MART_AAE_scan268).

Surely Italy in those years was devoting considerable attention and research in the museographic and staging field, as described in the introductory essay by Agnoldomenico Pica to the volume edited by Roberto Aloi on exhibition design (1960). The text offers a clear reading of the changes in the exhibitions between the 1920s and 1940s through a significant historical survey: «At the beginning of the 20th Century, but more clearly after the First World War, exhibitions changed not so much in terms of style, taste, or order, but more about their most intimate sense» (Aloi, 1960: 5). The exhibition of Etruscan art and civilization, organized at the Palazzo Reale (Milan) and designed by the architect Luciano Baldessari, fits well within this critical trend (Bardi, 1931; Mazzucchelli, 1934; Giolli, 1938; Esposizioni, 1941).

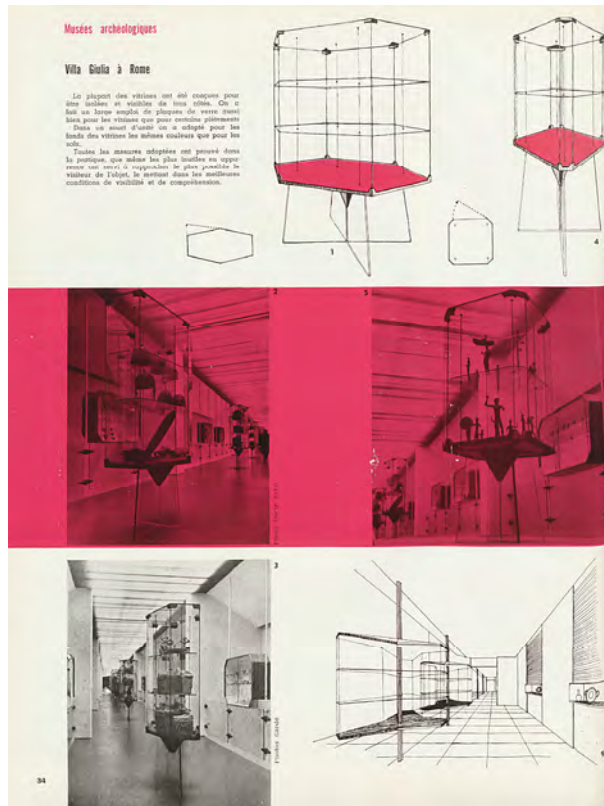


Fig. 4. Franco Minissi, Villa Giulia à Rome (Aujourd'hui. Art et Architecture, 8, June 1956, 34).

The architect creates real sets that can arouse different emotions in the visitor. The setting up of the historical section was entrusted to architect Franco Minissi⁶ who, at the same time, was dealing with the huge work of rearrangement of the Etruscan Museum of Villa Giulia in Rome. The intervention represents a second significant element in the definition of the exhibition choices of archaeological finds and was focused in particular on the transformation of the interior space to improve the museum distribution and increase the exhibition area, and on radical changes in the setting. The “showcase” became the central object of the path, greatly modified in its structure and conformation. The project was criticised but there

⁶ Franco Minissi, architect and museographer (Viterbo 1919 - Bracciano 1996). He was involved in the restoration and conservation of historical and artistic heritage and museography. In addition to carrying out an intense project activity in this area, he was a professor of Set-up and museography and revitalization and adaptation of ancient buildings at the University of Rome "La Sapienza". Among his works: Villa Giulia Museum, Roma (1954-60); Antiquarium in the Villa Aurea in Agrigento (1960); Barche Faraoniche Museum, Gizah (1960); Etruscan Museum, Tarquinia (1962-67); Archaeological Museum in Himeria (1970-78); Tesoro di San Pietro in Vaticano Museum (1975); New archaeological Museum Paolo Orsi, Siracusa (1970-81); Palazzo Della Penna Moden Art Museum, Perugia (1980-84); Palazzetto Venezia, Rome (1990).

were also supporters such as Bruno Zevi who, regarding the substantial contribution of transparency with the windows, objected: «[...] What was the capital to lay on? Perhaps on a false Etruscan wall in stone? Yesterday, reinforced concrete, today plastics or security glass are a source of insecurity for some people. But fortunately, not for everyone... There are good reasons to use perspex: it isolates the archaeological piece without arbitrary interventions; it allows to see the piece from all sides; it is light, modest matter, which nullifies itself thus facilitating a direct relationship between the exhibits and the space-environment that encloses them» (Zevi, 1955).

The Museum of Villa Giulia was the first of a territorial exhibition system on the Etruscan civilization. In the following years new collections opened: the archaeological museum of Cerveteri (1967) and the museum of Civitavecchia (1971), again set up by Minissi, finally the museum of Vulci (1975) and that of Civita Castellana (1977).



Fig. 5. Francesco Venezia, *Gli Etruschi a Palazzo Grassi* Exhibition (Casabella 686, February 2001, 7).

If the museums are more rooted in the territory and in the places of the excavations, the temporary exhibitions allow the dissemination of the Etruscan civilization through ever-new stories that reach as many cities as possible. Thus in 1966 a new travelling exhibition was proposed, passing through Vienna, Stockholm, Turin and Fiesole. In June 1967 *Arte e civiltà degli Etruschi* arrived in Turin at Palazzo dell'Accademia delle Scienze, an exhibition linked to the lucky discoveries of that decade. Meanwhile in Santa Barbara, California, *Etruscan Art from West Coast collections* was set up, curated by the University of California, and in Britain, at the Worcester Art Museum, *Master pieces of Etruscan Art* made its debut. These first exhibitions paved the way for other major events: the great *Etruscan Project* of 1985, the travelling exhibition *Les Etrusques et l'Europe* (Grand Palais, Paris and Altes Museum, Berlin 1992), the *Etruscan exhibition* (Palazzo Grassi, Venice 2000) and the new project of a Museum of Etruscan art (Milan 2020). The *Etruscan Project* represented an exceptional event that involved all the Etruscan centres and museums of Tuscany, but also the regions of Lazio, Umbria, Campania, Emilia Romagna and Lombardy, as essential parts of the territory occupied by the Etruscans. Among the exhibitions we shall mention those held in the Tuscan capital: *Civiltà degli etruschi*, curated by Mario Cristofani and set up in the Archaeological Museum by Adolfo Natalini with David Palterer and Giancarlo Mazzanti and *Fortuna degli etruschi* curated by Franco Borsi, Gabriele Morolli and Omar Calabrese in the Ospedale degli Innocenti with installation by Piero Castiglioni. Here the set-up themes became more complex and broke away from the lyrical aura of the first exhibitions of the Fifties. The travelling exhibition *Gli Etruschi e l'Europa*, curated by Massimo Pallottino passing through Paris and Berlin (1992), aimed to identify and illustrate the relationships between the Etruscan civilization and the cultural

experiences of the European world, trying to understand those elements that could have shaped the processes that led to European civilization.

The Etruscan exhibition organized at Palazzo Grassi in 2000 and set up by Francesco Venezia marked a return to the great Italian exhibition tradition: «Setting up is essentially the art of handing out; showing with measure and giving with kindness require attention and care» (Venezia 2001: 6). The atrium represents the culmination of the Venice exhibition research combined with Etruscan themes and languages: the atrium – the court of Palazzo Grassi – became a well of light enclosed in a volume that recalls the characters of the underground Etruscan space. The theme of the underground space typical of the Etruscan construction world is also found in the project for a museum of Etruscan art in Milan (2020), created by the will of the Luigi Rovati Foundation, and that represents an innovative piece in the museography history of this civilization⁷. The architect Mario Cucinella designs a concave and convex space that recalls the tombs of Cerveteri, a space that envelops the visitor looking for a contact. Finally, as a last museographical approach, mention should be made of the interventions that in recent years have been dealing with the re-establishment of historical museums such as the Gregorian Etruscan Museum, that in 2010 reopened the collection of vases whose ordering was edited by Maurizio Sannibale, and the Museum of the Etruscan and Roman City of Cortona (Italy) set up on a scientific project of the Archaeologist Mario Torelli. This reconstruction shows the need and the deep interest to draw the exhibition history that characterized the Etruscan civilization from the first forms of collecting to the present day. A necessary reconstruction, because it is a core part of its existence: not only in terms of content but also for the choices of museums and exhibitions that have contributed to the development of the themes of exhibiting with the progress of the archaeological discipline. There is, in fact, no research to date that brings together themes and discoveries of the Etruscan world with their dissemination through exhibitions.



Fig. 6. Mario Cucinella Architects, Museum and Foundation Luigi Rovati, Milan, 2016 – in progress (MCArchive).

⁷ «For this reason, under the three domes, we imagined a path with effects of lights and shadows» explains Cucinella, a metaphor for a civilization in a balance between earthly and non-earthly. «We want to create a suspended atmosphere, so even the vases are supported in mid-air by almost invisible stems, and the acoustics themselves contribute to transforming the visit into an emotional experience by preserving some sound reverberations, so that visitors hear their footsteps echoing or a whispering voice».

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