

MUDEC - Museum of Cultures of Milan, Italy

A DIFFERENT NARRATIVE OF THE COLONIAL PAST AND A RE-REINTERPRETATION WITHIN THE CONTEMPORARY CONTEXT

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In 2019, the decision was made to reorganize the permanent exhibition around an analysis of the effects— for Milan and seen from Milan—of the emergence of a networked world since the beginning of the modern era. *Global Milan. The World Seen from Here* presents a narrative in which individual stories are interwoven with major global historical processes. During the development phase of the new itinerary, a series of workshops were organized with various stakeholders.

The workshops initiated with African diaspora communities for the revision of the contents of the third room of the Global Milan itinerary were carried out within the framework of the international project Everything Passes Except the Past, promoted by the Goethe-Institut (with the participation of MUDEC curator Carolina Orsini). For this third room, the curators collaborated with Afro-descendant participants in a participatory museology project.

This room explores the complex and sensitive framework within which European colonial expansion into Africa unfolded between the second half of the 19th century and the first decades of the 20th.

Its starting point lays, on the one hand, in the rediscovery of colonial objects that remained in the storage of the Museo del Risorgimento (Milan) for years and, on the other, in the desire to narrate the colonial past from its very origins.

The aim was to challenge and address a narrative that, for decades, had either minimized or entirely erased Italy's colonial history in Africa. This erasure has contributed to the shaping of a society largely unaware of the crimes and historical responsibilities of the Italian government during the periods of occupation. One of the central issues in the discussion concerned the language to be adopted in the exhibition texts. Reflecting on this aspect was considered crucial, since the way we express ourselves can often reveal the influence of structural racism.
The work therefore focused on deconstructing the rhetoric of victory, avoiding terms laden with violence such as "conquest," as well as simplistic dichotomies like victory/defeat, colonizer/colonized, explorer/exploited.





Objects from the colonial period, recently rediscovered in the storage area of the Museo del Risorgimento in Milan and originating from the War Museum, are displayed in the second section of the third room.



During the workshop with the Afro-descendant community, the recovered and restored artefacts were examined, and together the curators and the community determined how they should be displayed.



Some displayed objects were donated by students after school competitions, featuring items from relatives who fought in Africa, showing how propaganda shaped public opinion.

The Museum of Cultures of Milan is a center dedicated to the interdisciplinary research on world cultures. Taking inspirations from the civic ethnographic collections and in partnership with communities, we intend to create space for dialogue on contemporary themes by the medium of visual, performing and sound art, design and costume.
Since its opening, MUDEC has engaged with contemporary debates on museum practices influenced by postcolonial and decolonial theories, initiating an ongoing dialogue with the international communities living in Milan. Through the project Milano Città Mondo (MCM), active from the very beginning in coordinating the 500 diaspora associations gathered in the Forum delle Culture (founded in 2011) and representing around 100 international communities, the museum has been recognized as a place of encounter and representation. This participatory practice aimed at establishing an active dialogue with the city's international citizens. This experience, ten years after the inauguration, stands as a fundamental device for listening to and engaging with the cultural pluralities inhabiting the urban context. Building on these premises, in 2019 the museum's scientific committee and curators promoted a series of participatory meetings with activists and representatives of the communities involved, with the aim of collectively discussing the content and thematic directions of the new permanent exhibition, opened in 2021.



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