



MUSEUM SYSTEM AND WIDESPREAD HERITAGE OF THE UNIVERSITY OF PADUA: perspectives for enhancement

Giuliana Tomasella

Università di Padova

Via VIII Febbraio, Pádua, Itália

giuliana.tomasela@unipd.it

ORCID: 0000-0001-7888-1416



ABSTRACT

In the course of their history, European universities - especially the oldest ones - have accumulated extraordinary collections, the result of a vast research activity involving many disciplines. Despite its intrinsic value, this heritage is still waiting to be fully recognised and legitimised and needs adequate management tools. The potential of university museum heritage has not yet been adequately understood and utilized due to their "hybrid" nature, institutions linked to research but at the same time open to the territory; the difficulties deriving from the lack of recognition of the crucial figure of museum keepers within the university staff structure; the persistence of a fragmented and polycentric management system; and the lack of a shared cataloguing system. This article analyzes the emblematic case of the University of Padua: The extent of its heritage has raised issues of conservation and management that are not easy to solve, requiring qualified personnel, long-term strategies and an overall vision.

Keywords: University museums; Academic Heritage; Padua University

Introduction

In the course of their history, European universities - especially the oldest ones - have accumulated extraordinary collections, the result of a vast research activity involving many disciplines. Despite its intrinsic value, this heritage is still waiting to be fully recognised and legitimised and needs adequate management tools.

The potential of university museum heritage has not yet been adequately understood and utilized due to their "hybrid" nature, institutions linked to research but at the same time open to the territory; the difficulties deriving from the lack of recognition of the crucial figure of museum keepers within the university staff structure; the persistence of a fragmented and polycentric management system; and the lack of a shared cataloguing system.

In 2000 there were two important acknowledgments: the establishment within ICOM (International Council of Museums) of UMAC (University Museums And Collections), the international forum for those working in, or associated with, academic museums, galleries and collections; and the foundation of *Universeum*, the European network of heritage and museum professionals, researchers, students, university administrators and those involved in the study and management of university heritage. Finally, the Heritage Working Group was established in 2016 within the Coimbra Group, the network that brings together a large number of European universities; the Heritage Group has among its main objectives the enhancement of university collections. These important initiatives have seen the participation of individual museum operators but not the involvement of universities at an institutional level¹.

The case of the University of Padua is emblematic: in the course of its long history, the university has accumulated both scientific collections and objects and buildings of historical and artistic interest. The extent of this heritage has raised issues of conservation and management that are not easy to solve, requiring qualified personnel, long-term strategies and an overall vision, also concerning the increasingly urgent need to share this widespread heritage with the city and the territory. At the same time, the scientific vocation of museums and collections, which is coessential to their creation, must not be sacrificed, as it is linked to the aim of increasing knowledge in the various disciplines and supporting teaching. The Athenaeum Centre for Museums (CAM) currently coordinates thirteen museums of different sizes. However, we are in the midst of a profound transformation and soon, four of these institutions (Geology and Palaeontology, Mineralogy, Zoology and Anthropology) will merge into the large new Museo della Natura e dell'Uomo, which will open on the occasion of the eighth centenary of the university, which was founded in 1222. In addition, the Botanical Museum is being transformed entirely and considerably enlarged, and the Museum of the History of Physics, which changed its name into Museo Giovanni Poleni, in honour of the great eighteenth-century scholar, has been renovated. The other museums of the university network are the Museum of Education, the Museum of Archaeological Sciences and Art, the Museum of Machines "Enrico Bernardi", the Museum of Anatomy "Morgagni", the Museum of Geography, the Museum of Veterinary Medicine and the Museum of Astronomical Instruments. In addition, there are several departmental collections².

¹ <http://umac.icom.museum/>

<https://www.universeum-network.eu/>

<https://www.coimbra-group.eu/working-group/heritage/> Conference proceedings on topics related to university heritage can also be downloaded from the websites.

²For more information on museums and collections, please visit the CAM website: <https://www.musei.unipd.it/>

In addition to the museums and collections recognised by the University and included in the CAM statute, there is a considerable amount of scattered material - collections, groups of objects or single objects - which can fully be counted as historical heritage. Although several departments or research groups have undertaken to collect and protect this material in some instances, little or nothing is often known about this 'hidden' heritage. Until recently, no systematic survey had ever been carried out to at least map the existing collections and artefacts. In recent years, thanks to projects that have provided for specific research grants, 'scattered collections' have been studied: so far, 16 'new' collections of scientific instruments of various kinds have emerged (Talas 2019). It should be remembered that instruments over 50 years old are protected by Italian legislation. The numbers are considerable: several thousand objects have been studied and catalogued (but the number is expected to increase). In addition, the conspicuous collections of photographs, including those from the 19th century, must be considered.

There are also many historic buildings with fine decorations and furnishings. This extensive heritage is a remarkable resource, of course, but at the same time implies numerous problems of conservation, valorisation and 'coexistence' with the normal scientific and teaching activities typical of a large, modern university.

Origins and development of the University of Padua's collections

In order to understand the current structure of the museum system of the University of Padua, it is necessary to contextualise it within a long history whose beginnings date back to the early eighteenth century. Hundreds of thousands of artefacts have been accumulated over the last three centuries. It was in the 18th century - in parallel with the birth of museums in the modern sense - that the first model of a university museum was defined within the University of Padua, originating from the collection of the physician and naturalist Antonio Vallisneri, who was professor of practical and then theoretical medicine from 1700 to 1733. He was a collector before he became a professor, but it was at the same time as his teaching that the project of creating a museum, organised according to scientific principles, was developed; it was intended on the one hand to support the professor's research, and on the other to provide him with a teaching aid. The history of this original nucleus - of which a few dozen pieces scattered in different locations have been identified with certainty - has been widely studied, as has the figure of this extraordinary precursor of modern scientific museology. Indeed, he was in contact with the most influential scientists and antiquarians of his time, Luigi Ferdinando Marsili, Johann Jakob Scheuchzer, Lous Bourguet, Scipione Maffei and many others (Canadelli 2016, Contardi 1994, Generali 2000, 2007, 2008, Luzzini 2013). Maffei, founder of the Museo Epigrafico Maffeiano in Verona, one of the key examples of eighteenth-century museography, was also the owner of the famous fossil deposit of Bolca near Verona. This was one of the richest in the world, which documents a phase (about 50 million years ago) when a tropical climate characterized the area of north-eastern Italy. We know that Maffei donated some fish fossils to Vallisneri, as some letters document (Canadelli 2016, p. 450). The fame of the 'Vallisnerian Museum' became increasingly widespread so that illustrious travellers passing through Padua decided to visit it and left us interesting descriptions of it: this is the case, among others, of Montesquieu, who recalls this in his memoirs of the Grand Tour:

I visited Mr Vallisneri's cabinet of curiosities: there is a great quantity of all sorts of animals: snakes, poisonous insects, put into bottles and preserved in spirit. Bottles without bottoms are made for this purpose; then a lead bottom is made, which is joined under the bottle with glass lead, soldered with tin, and on top of this lid you can put whatever you want. Mr Vallisneri has some stones, which in the middle, between one and the other, clearly show the imprint of the fish that died there. There is a sheet of written papyrus; all sorts of corals and concretions; two ivory needles, with which the women have vented their natural instincts, which have been lost, passed into the bladder there and encrusted with stony matter, the thickness of the little finger. There are corals, which are stratifications formed on branches of dry wood, which makes Mr Vallisneri think that coral is not a plant, but an aggregate of a certain material found in the sea, caused either by the occasion of a certain wood, or by another occasion; all sorts of shells. He has even a *serricunium*, which he believes to be very ancient (but it is not, and is very badly arranged); all sorts of surgical instruments; a great quantity of fragments of ancient statues, several pieces of minerals: numerous statuettes of Divinities, 5 or 6 inches high, etc.

The similarity with the Wunderkammern should not deceive us about the purpose of this collection. As has been written, it was actually,

A museum [...] conceived as a sort of encyclopaedia of knowledge, where the arrangement of the series did not respond to aesthetic criteria, but to the order of nature, which had to vary, together with their arrangement, in line with the progress of research and the evolution of theories. From a scientific point of view, the exhibits all had the same value, because the aim of naturalistic collections was to strive for the completeness of the series of beings and their methodical arrangement. From this perspective, which was the only one that mattered, an earth was worth as much as a diamond and any gaps in the series should not be camouflaged by any aesthetic artifice, which would have been more misleading than useful in terms of the museographic objective. (Generali 2007, p. 355).

Moreover, it should not be forgotten that Vallisneri was also interested in art, so much so that he made an important acquisition of 200 artworks from the well-known collection of Marco Mantova Benavides, which dated back to the 16th century. It was sold by the last descendant of the family who had fallen into financial hardship (Generali 2007, p. 367). It was a mixed collection of ancient and Renaissance works, and the naturalist showed considerable expertise and interest in choosing them. As we shall see, this nucleus has remained almost intact and has arrived at the Museum of Archaeological Sciences and Art (Favaretto, Menegazzi 2013).

After the naturalist's death in 1733, his son Antonio Vallisneri Jr. donated his father's museum to the University of Padua. He then became a professor of Natural History and contributed to augmenting the collection with important acquisitions. Between 1735 and 1736, the exhibits were set up in the university's premises in Palazzo Bo, where they were used for teaching purposes. When the younger Vallisneri died in 1777, the chair of Natural History was closed and the museum was entrusted to the care of a custodian for around twenty years.

During the 19th century, in parallel with the specialisation of the various disciplines and the creation of new chairs, the Vallisnerian museum was split into multiple sections. Because of these successive divisions and the lack of rigorous cataloguing, the memory of the original nucleus in its entirety was lost. (Gregolin 1996, *La curiosità e l'ingegno* 2000).

In the meantime, another important collection had taken shape: that of the great physicist Giovanni Poleni, appointed to the chair of experimental physics in 1738 (Soppelsa 1988,

Del Negro 2013). To him, we owe the creation of the first Cabinet of Experimental Physics, established in Palazzo Bo. This collection contains a series of instruments that exemplify the radical changes characterising teaching in the 18th century. It was in that century, in particular, when experiments began to be carried out, including in public, to provide direct, immediate and sometimes spectacular demonstrations of the laws of physics (Talas 2020, 2013).

Poleni and his successors not only used state-of-the-art instruments but also acquired older ones: this explains the presence of astrolabes, telescopes and armillary spheres dating back to the 16th and 17th centuries in the current Museum Poleni of the History of Physics.

Over time, the collections were enriched and new instruments were acquired, commissioned and designed by the professors themselves to study, teach and experiment in the fields of astronomy, mechanics, pneumatics and electricity. While the corpus of artefacts that Poleni had begun to collect remain intact - and is now preserved in the Museum Poleni of the History of Physics - in the case of the Vallisnerian museum, as already mentioned, the situation was different: in 1806, the collections of antiquities and natural history, which had hitherto been whole, was split: the former became the core of the Cabinet of Numismatics and Antiquities, while the latter remained in Palazzo Bo, the university's main building. A further division occurred in 1869 when the natural history chair was divided into Zoology and Comparative Anatomy on one side and Geology, Palaeontology and Mineralogy on the other. The original museum was divided and the subgroups of exhibits formed the generative nucleus of some of the university's museums, which gradually became attached to the related disciplines, then to the institutes, and finally to the departments.

The Museum of Geology and Palaeontology is undoubtedly one of the most important, due to the immensity and importance of its collections, which have grown particularly since the 19th century. It includes fossils of inestimable value from the Bolca area, including the imposing palms that give their name to a magnificent room that reconstructs an evocative stone forest (fig. 1) (Altichieri 1982, Altichieri *et al.* 1987, Altichieri, Piccoli 1996).

Figure 1



Source: Federico Milanesi. Copyright: Università di Padova – 2021

Of course, there are also museums of more recent formation, such as the Museum of Anthropology, founded in 1882, the Museum of Education, founded in 1992 and the very recent Museum of Geography, which opened in 2019.

The location of the museums in the buildings used for teaching purposes and the limited space available to them make them difficult to open to the public. These limitations have prevented the full appreciation of our heritage. For this very reason, the need arises to bring together some of the collections into a single, large space. The Palazzo Cavalli complex has been chosen for this, consisting in a historic nucleus joined by a set of more recent buildings, which are being thoroughly transformed. The new Museo della Natura e dell'Uomo will provide an opportunity to enhance a significant part of the university's heritage and will finally open a space for the city and the surrounding area to discover both the university's ancient and more recent naturalistic and anthropological collections.

Widespread historical and artistic heritage

The University of Padua is a large university that has developed within a relatively small city. With two hundred and ten thousand inhabitants and more than sixty thousand students, it is evident that the city is closely linked to its ancient university with which it identifies. Eight hundred years of history have shaped this symbiotic relationship, evoked even in popular sayings such as "Padovani gran dottori"...

Almost all the old and modern buildings owned by the university are located in the historic centre or its immediate vicinity: the university has therefore contributed to the city's urban design. This starts from its generative, historically stratified nucleus, Palazzo Bo, a place of high symbolic density and space *par excellence* for academic self-celebration. Precisely because of this symbolic density - reinforced in the 1930s during the fascist period - Palazzo Bo has, to some extent, obscured the rest of the university's historical and artistic heritage in the perception of the university's professors and employees in general. It has always been looked after and safeguarded with respect³. The building is characterised by the coexistence of historical and modern elements, thanks to the intervention of architect Gio Ponti, who redesigned the rector's quarters and other places of academic life as part of the grand plan to renovate the image of the university that the archaeologist Carlo Anti launched during his rectorate. (1932-1943) (Nezzo 2008).

I do not intend to discuss the complex architectural history and decorations of the building, on which there is a vast specific bibliography (Semenzato, De Carlo 1991, Semenzato 1989; Semenzato 1999, Zaggia 2003, Zaggia 2015), but I will highlight what has recently been done and is currently being done to enhance - at various levels - this part of the university's artistic heritage. For some years now, the Bo has been open to the public, albeit within certain restrictions imposed for security reasons and as a place where people work. It can be accessed through guided tours, with prior registration, in extensive opening hours. As far as education and utilization are concerned, a recent change of pace should be noted. Whereas until recently external cooperatives were commissioned to run guided tours, these are now

³ Last, in order of time, were the restorations of the ancient courtyard, financed by the University, Fondazione Cariparo (Cassa di Risparmio di Padova e Rovigo) and the municipality of Padua, on which see *Il cortile antico del Palazzo del Bo a Padova*, edited by S. ZAGGIA, Geneva-Milan, 2015.

carried out by students from the Humanities. They do their internship here after being trained by professors.

A visit to the Bo includes an itinerary that starts from the historical classrooms, which still preserve medieval vestiges (such as the one for medicine), to the magnificent anatomical theatre of 1594 by Girolamo Fabrici d'Acquapendente, and end in the areas most extensively transformed by Gio Ponti in the 1930s. This last part presented the dilemma of providing students with a critical approach to presenting rooms and decorations unequivocally compromised by the propaganda of the fascist regime. This is an important challenge in our country, which seems not to have reflected as profoundly as Germany, for example, on the uncomfortable legacy of fascist monuments that mark - sometimes very conspicuously - the expression of our cities. As Ruth Ben-Ghyat wrote, precisely as Mussolini had to deal with Italy's extraordinary artistic heritage, he "knew that he needed a multitude of markers to imprint the Fascist ideology on the landscape"⁴.

To this regard, it should be remembered that among the thirteen museums that the Centro di Ateneo (CAM) currently coordinates, there is also the Museo degli Strumenti di Astronomia (Museum of Astronomical Instruments), located within the complex that includes the astronomical observatory and the guest quarters built in Asiago (fig. 2) - as part of the same renovation programme launched by Anti. The project was designed by architect Daniele Calabi, who worked on it between 1936 and 1938. Due to racial laws, however, he was forced to emigrate to Brazil, and his name was removed from the professional register of Italian architects on 15 February 1940, when he was already living in São Paulo (Dal Piaz 1988). The construction of the observatory he had designed, which was a source of pride for the University of Padua as it represented the most advanced in astronomical studies at the time, was carried out by others. At the inauguration, the buildings were celebrated by a plaque with such a tone: "Iussu Beniti Mussolini universitatis patavinae rector magnificus Carolus Anti harum aedium exstruendi curam suscepit easque perfectissimis instruxit machinis quibus caelum explorantes terrae nescii essent atque sui". In it, the name and memory of the persecuted architect are concealed, and all merit is ascribed to the collaboration between the rector and the dictator. Recently, to repair this injustice, another commemorative plaque was placed on 27 May 2022 that reads: "Daniele Calabi Verona 1906 - Venice 1964. Architect, he designed and started the construction of this Observatory. Of Jewish origin, he was forced to leave Italy in January 1939 due to fascist race laws. He only returned in 1948. On the day of the Observatory's inauguration, no one mentioned his name. In his memory, the Department of Physics and Astronomy of the University of Padua - 27 May 2022".

⁴ RUTH BEN-GHYAT in the article *Why Are So Many Fascist Monuments Still Standing in Italy?* in «New Yorker», 5 October 2017 writes: «The sheer number of relics is one reason. When Mussolini came to power, in 1922, he was leading a new movement in a country with a formidable cultural patrimony, and he knew that he needed a multitude of markers to imprint the Fascist ideology on the landscape. Public projects, such as the Foro Mussolini sports complex, in Rome, were meant to rival those of the Medici and the Vatican, while the likeness of Il Duce, as Mussolini was known, watched over Italians in the form of statues, photographs in offices, posters at tram stops, and even prints on bathing suits. It was easy to feel, as Italo Calvino did, that Fascism had colonized Italy's public realm. "I spent the first twenty years of my life with Mussolini's face always in view," the writer recalled» (<https://www.newyorker.com/culture/culture-desk/why-are-so-many-fascist-monuments-still-standing-in-italy>).

Figure 2



Source: Federico Milanesi. Copyright: Università di Padova – 2021

The fact that, in the heart of our university, the mark of fascism is so strong is an opportunity to take up the challenge of re-reading our history - including our artistic history. This would allow us to reach a delicate balance between recognising aesthetic achievements (when they exist) and unmasking rhetoric and ideological propaganda. Scientific insights such as the one offered by the book *Il miraggio della concordia* edited by Marta Nezzo (Nezzo 2008), provide the right tools to guide us in this action of critical valorisation. In addition to collecting the contributions of scholars on architectural and decorative works, the book publishes a large number of documents kept in the central archive of the Bo. They reveal the complex dynamics of the relationship between academic patrons and artists, placing it in the broader framework of the fascist policy of the arts.

The process of critical enhancement should include another significant place, but of much less importance in terms of public awareness and visibility; Palazzo Liviano, designed by Gio Ponti as the new seat of the Facoltà di Lettere e Filosofia. It was built close to what remains of the old palace of the Carraresi family, who dominated Padua in the 14th century. The atrium of the Liviano, decorated with frescoes by Massimo Campigli and hosting the imposing statue of Titus Livius by Arturo Martini (fig.3), leads to the Sala dei Giganti, decorated with 16th-century frescoes⁵.

⁵ E. Saccomani has already examined the room in the essay cited in note 1; see also this essay for the bibliography. As far as conservation is concerned, mention should be made of the restoration commissioned by the university in 2006/2007 (360,000 euros) in agreement with the Soprintendenza per i Beni Storico-Artistici, Librari e Archivistici delle Province di Venezia, Belluno, Padova and Treviso.

Figure 3



Source: Federico Milanesi. Copyright: Università di Padova – 2021

In recent years, to promote knowledge of this building, real and virtual exhibitions have been organised both for students in the Master's degree course in art history and for those in the Scuola di Specializzazione in Beni storico-artistici⁶. The third floor of the Liviano houses an authentic gem of the university's museum system: the Museum of Archaeological Sciences

⁶ In November-December 2016, I organised with the students of the History of Art master's degree course, as part of the History of Art Criticism course, the exhibition *Alle radici del metodo. Le origini della Storia dell'arte all'Università di Padova*. The exhibition was held in the atrium of the Liviano and provided an opportunity to reflect with the students both on the material heritage of the palazzo and its decorations and on the intangible heritage represented by the school of Veneto art studies (but not only) that Giuseppe Fiocco founded, followed by his students Sergio Bettini and Rodolfo Pallucchini; Marta Nezzo dedicated the course in Museology held in 2016/2017 at the Scuola di Specializzazione in Beni Storico artistici to *University as a Community. Identity and Memory: The Liviano between Yesterday and Today* which will become a virtual exhibition published on the platform Movio.

and Art, which was designed in detail by Ponti, although not fully completed at the time, due to the outbreak of the Second World War. During the 1960s and 1970s, the museum underwent major renovations to adapt it to the new museographic criteria, but also to obscure - in an operation of *damnatio memoriae* - the mark of the work carried out by the "rettore fascistissimo". At the end of the 1990s, it was carefully restored, recovering the beautiful work designed by Ponti that evoke the model of the Roman *domus* with the *impluvium* (fig. 4) with elegance and lightness. In this museum, both plaster casts and ancient artefacts are collected, as well as bronzes and marbles from the Renaissance. Some of the objects come from the Mantova Benavides collection (Favaretto 1980, 1984, Favaretto, Menegazzi 2013, Olivato 1984). In recent years, intensive research and valorisation work has been carried out in the museum, but efforts have also been made to open it up as much as possible to school visits and make it the centre of initiatives addressed to the community.

Figure 4



Source: Federico Milanesi. Copyright: Università di Padova – 2021

I would like to focus on two examples, which are significant in terms of their impact on visitors' experience: the display in their original position – in a 16th-century cupboard - of artefacts from the Mantova Benavides collection⁷(fig.5) and the creation of an interactive workstation to help visitors understand the history and functioning of an ancient flute from Egypt, which was one of the result of Anti's archaeological research. The extremely rare artefact was carefully restored and, with the scientific support of the Centre for Computational Sonology of the Department of Information Engineering, an interactive station was set up next to its display case. It enables visitors to learn more about the origin and characteristics of the flute and to explore it visually and acoustically through touch and breath⁸ . In this way, different

7 <https://www.musei.unipd.it/it/archeologia/mantova-benavides>

8 The Pan's flute project started in the context of the 'Egypt in Veneto' exhibition curated by Paola Zanovello in 2013. <https://ilbolive.unipd.it/flauto-pan-l%E2%80%99installazione-interattiva-che-permette-suonarlo>

skills conjoin to create a device that combines scientific research and interdisciplinary experimentation at the visitor's service.

Figure 5



Source: Federico Milanese. Copyright: Università di Padova – 2021

I believe that, in order to make the most of the extraordinary heritage of our university, it is necessary to take advantage of the excellent, diverse skills operating within. In this way, we can channel our efforts into research projects that offer the public interweaving paths, convey the idea of the heterogeneous richness of our heritage, and make the objects the focus of a dense network of connections, histories and relations.

We often say that most university collections are "scientific", meaning that they are different from artistic collections, but are we sure that it is easy to draw a line between art and science, humanities, and non-humanities? One of the oldest and most precious exhibits in the zoology museum's collections – handed down by Vallisneri and perhaps, through him, from the Mantova Benavides collection - a nautilus shell transformed into a candelabra bowl (fig. 6), shows us that the mixture of *naturalia* and *artificialia* is at the origin of our collections⁹. It is a particularly fascinating object because it combines the work of nature and human creativity: the mysterious mollusk from the depths of the sea, enclosed in its elegant shell, becomes an ornamental object. It is useful for the advancement of studies and aesthetically pleasing due to the transformation it underwent.

⁹ On the Nautilus see P. TURCHETTO-P. NICOLOSI, *Nautilo istoriato* in *La curiosità e l'ingegno*, cit., p. 199.

Figure 6



Source: Federico Milanesi. Copyright: Università di Padova – 2021

But it is not only the 16th-17th century taste of the Wunderkammern that speaks to us of this polysemantic nature of objects that transcends boundaries among disciplines and places them in dialogue with each other. An eloquent example is the “macchina divulsoria”, kept in the Museum of the History of Physics, which was used by Giovanni Poleni in 1743 to determine the tensile strength of the iron bars to be used in the restoration of St. Peter’s dome on which Pope Benedict XIV had consulted him (Soppelsa 1984, Del Negro 2013).

The need to take into account different levels and interconnectedness arises especially when we consider the historical buildings owned by the University that house scientific museums: this is the case of Palazzo Cavalli, the current seat of the Museum of Geology and Palaeontology - as well as the University Centre for Museums - an emblematic building for a series of reasons and considerations. It is a 16th-century building with important and well-preserved fresco cycles dating from the late 17th and early 18th centuries (Ton 2018, Marin 2020) (fig.7), which will soon become the *site* of the University of Padua’s new Museo della Natura e dell’Uomo, which will house the palaeontology, mineralogy, zoology and anthropology collections. The project also includes ample space for temporary exhibitions, which will allow other parts of the university’s heritage to be displayed. The complex is located in front of the Scrovegni Chapel and the Civic Museums, in an area that is particularly suitable for integrated tours.

⁹ On the Nautilus see P. Turchetto-P. Nicolosi, *Nautilo istoriato* in *La curiosità e l’ingegno*, cit., p. 199.

Figure 7



Source: Federico Milanese. Copyright: Università di Padova – 2021

Despite the value of the building and its collections¹⁰, we are surprised to note that it is little known to Paduans themselves, including our university employees. In recent years (before Covid) CAM promoted an intensive programme of activities centred on Palazzo Cavalli: opening hours were considerably extended, including weekends; “micro-exhibitions” were organised, focusing on single objects from the various university museums; historical-scientific insights into those objects were proposed thanks to the organisation of conferences open to the city; and visits to the palace were made, publicised by local newspapers. Since self-awareness and pride of identity are fundamental sources for valorisation, we proposed guided tours specifically dedicated to university staff, who responded enthusiastically to the initiative. In May 2019, we set up an exhibition dedicated to the history and decorative cycles of the palace, which made extensive use of multimedia. This was also made possible thanks to a substantial financial commitment from the university, which made it possible to offer six three-year grants to research, catalog, and create virtual tours focused on the collections. The research carried out by the researcher in the field of artistic heritage brought to light new documents and materials useful for reconstructing the stratified and complex history of the Cavalli

¹⁰ On the decoration of the palace I refer to D. TON in *Affreschi nei palazzi di Padova. Il Sei e Settecento*, edited by V. MANCINI-A. TOMEZZOLI-D. TON, Verona, 2018, pp. 175-203. As far as the very important palaeontological collections are concerned, I would like to mention at least the extraordinary Sala delle Palme (Palm Room), which was re-designed in 2008 to include the wooden display cases from the 1930s in the new showcases. The room houses large fossil palms dating from between fifty and thirty million years ago. A veritable forest of stone from the Bolca (Vr) fossil site. <https://www.musei.unipd.it/it/geologia/collezioni/geologia-collezione->

palace and the families that lived there, the various decorative phases and the restorations and modifications that affected it (Marin 2020). Similarly, the study of other young researchers covering medical history, archaeology, anthropology, zoology, palaeontology, and scattered collections¹¹ brought to light previously unknown data. These allow for in-depth studies of specific artefacts, while at the same time studying and proposing new outreach strategies. In the sad period marked by the lockdown, we have been forced to move our initiatives *online*, promoting conferences open to all, targeted studies on the finds, and meetings/workshops with children. The fair amount of popularity gained in the previous period allowed us to reach a considerable audience.

Concerning the artistic heritage (Saccomani 2016, Tomasella 2021, Bonetto *et al.* 2022), there are still many aspects to be explored, particularly with regard to the study and enhancement of certain historical buildings, such as Palazzo Maldura, Palazzo Wollemborg and Palazzo Luzzato Dina, which are currently the focus of a university research project¹². In addition to these prestigious buildings in the city centre, it is worth mentioning the 19th-century Villa Revedin Bolasco in Castelfranco Veneto, donated to the University in 1967 by Countess Renata Mazza, widow of Pietro Bolasco Piccinelli. The residence, designed by Giambattista Meduna, is surrounded by an immense, evocative park with a riding arena, the 'cavallerizza', adorned with numerous statues, most of which made by Orazio Marinali and his workshop and came from the pre-existing garden "all'italiana". Until recently, the villa and park were in a deplorable state of conservation and only in 2017 were they largely restored; recently, the villa has become the headquarters of the University of Padua's "Centre for the restoration, recovery and valorisation of historic parks and monumental trees" and the park has been opened for visits at weekends¹³.

Another important field is that of contemporary art: after the Second World War, several important artists were commissioned to carry out decorative works, which in some cases lie neglected, awaiting attention and re-evaluation. For example, in 1958, Bruno Saetti painted a fresco of *Mother and Child* in the chapel of the gynaecological clinic (now propped up as it is unsafe); in 1964 Gino Morandis, one of the protagonists of Venetian spatialism, made several wall paintings (frescoes with extensive dry-painting) in the atrium of the Morgagni lecture hall of the university polyclinic, in an area intended as a bar and refreshment area for doctors and students. The artist painted cosmic-spatial images inspired by various aspects of medical science on a large surface, inserting figurative pieces into the flow of kaleidoscopic tonal passages.

¹¹ We are carrying on along the path taken by a research project carried out by Prof. Giulio Peruzzi in 2015, which led to an initial survey and inventory of a hidden heritage of objects or groups of objects of historical value - in particular scientific instruments - located in several departments.

¹² Elena Svalduz, *Da palazzi nobiliari a sede universitarie. Nuovi modelli di studio e rappresentazione del patrimonio architettonico dell'Università di Padova*, University research project, 2018: within this project Palazzo Luzzato Dina in via Vescovado, Palazzo Sala in via San Francesco, Palazzo Dottori and Palazzo Wollemborg in via del Santo will be studied Chiara Marin, in charge of the research on the artistic heritage, catalogued Palazzo Cavalli and Palazzo Maldura in Sigecweb. Naturally, collaboration and integration between the two research projects is planned. On the decoration of Palazzo Maldura, see A. TOMEZZOLI in *Affreschi nei palazzi di Padova. Il Sei e Settecento*, cit., pp. 279-299.

¹³ <https://www.villaparcobolasco.it/>

The former Institute of Art History (now the Department of Cultural Heritage) has also enjoyed important collaborations with artists over the years. The collection of graphic art that for many years decorated the teachers' studios and corridors dates to the 1950s and 1960s; apart from a small nucleus that comes from the initiative of Professor Giuseppe Fiocco, the bulk of the collection is attributable to the efforts of Rodolfo Pallucchini, professor of History of Modern Art in Padua from 1956 to 1978. Pallucchini was General Secretary of the International Venice Biennale from 1948 to 1956. In this role, he had the opportunity to establish relations with numerous artists, whom he asked to donate graphic works to the Institute of Art History. Both figurative and abstract painters responded, including Guttuso, Santomaso, Vedova, Saetti, Zigaina, Campigli, Dufy, Capogrossi, Spacal and others (Dal Canton 2011).

Recently, when the books were moved to the library's new premises, it became necessary to remove the artworks from their location due to the absence of security staff. We are now faced with several alternatives and many risks: simply leaving the works safely in storage; promoting a project of musealisation, which implies an inevitable decontextualizing of works donated to inhabit a place of life and study; finally, attempting to relocate them while ensuring appropriate security and conservation measures.

The same problem occurs with the furnishings designed by Gio Ponti, which decorate the rectory quarters, the Liviano palace and other offices: it is only when a historicisation takes place that we realise the dangers of living with valuable objects and works of art, due to the real possibility of theft and poor maintenance. We suddenly see what has always been in front of our eyes. The value we recognise determines an entire series of reflections and actions that have an inevitable economic impact.

Conclusions

Preserving, enhancing and managing artistic heritage of this extent and importance is one of the many challenges that the University of Padua and other - large and small - Italian universities must face to integrate the different "missions" to which they are called. For it to become an opportunity - rather than a burden (as some believe) -, joint, transdisciplinary action is needed, involving a diverse cast of characters, transforming universities into cutting-edge laboratories. The importance of a common cataloguing system is increasingly recognised, making it possible to overcome the fragmentation of experience and, at the same time, the need for continuous technological updating and the costs this implies. It is necessary to go beyond the cataloguing systems managed independently by individual universities or sometimes even individual museums. These have been shown to fail, as they are unsustainable self-referential systems that do not guarantee the circulation and sharing of knowledge. In this perspective - as far as Italy is concerned - the national platform SigecWEB, developed by the Istituto Centrale per il Catalogo e la Documentazione del Ministero per i Beni Culturali (MIBACT)¹⁴, is the most suitable tool for cataloguing museum heritage; it guarantees the best protection, although it does not meet all the needs of museums. In this particular case, SigecWEB cannot be considered a functional system for the day-to-day management of collections, i.e., a system that allows for the timely collection of all lending, restoration, monitoring of conservation status, constant updating of bibliographic and iconographic data, research activities,

¹⁴<https://catalogo.beniculturali.it/>

etc.. Therefore, it is necessary to adopt a supplementary system of collection management to fully meet the requirements imposed by complex and articulated cultural heritage (in terms of number and diversity of materials) such as those of universities.

Given all the considerations above, an investment must be made in human resources: for museums and integrated itineraries to work, dedicated staff are needed, i.e., first and foremost, highly qualified museum keepers in sufficient numbers. In addition to this specific expertise on individual collections, it is increasingly important to have a management background, such as that offered by targeted courses on cultural heritage legislation, or a Master's in managing cultural heritage and institutions. For this reason, particular attention must be paid to the recruitment of new staff and the training of existing staff to offer opportunities for professional development and thus improve motivation and enthusiasm. As observed, much has been written about the responsibility of universities for their museums, but the time has come to reverse this point of view, highlighting what museums and heritage in general, both tangible and intangible, can offer in return: first and foremost by helping tell the history of our universities through the artworks, specimens, scientific instruments and historic buildings that are their identity markers and living memory ¹⁵.

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¹⁵On this subject see Z. R. KOZAK, *The role of University Museums and Heritage in the 21st Century*, in «The Museum Review», Volume 1, Number 1, 2016: «Much has been written on the responsibilities of the university to its museum, but what does the university museum offer in return? In the increasingly market-driven world of higher education, university museums are expected to offer a greater and more direct service in relation to their parent institution. By recapturing the spirit of institutional identity and promotion previously mentioned, university museums have the opportunity not only to display objects and collections unique to their institutions, but also to use them to illustrate their university story» (<http://articles.themuseumreview.org/vol1no1kozak>, p. 5).

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