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KNOWLEDGE OF THINGS:
REASSESSING THE INDIGENOUS
AMERICAN HERITAGE IN ITALY

Museo Civico Medievale – Bologna Musei – Musei Civici d'Arte Antica

Via Manzoni, 3, 40125 Bologna

Form compiled by: Mark Gregory D'Apuzzo (Curator), in collaboration with Davide Domenici

Introduction

The Museo Civico Medievale preserves important artefacts originating from historic Bolognese collections, including those of Ulisse Aldrovandi, Ferdinando Cospi, the Istituto delle Scienze and the painter Pelagio Palagi. From each of these collecting nuclei derive a number of Indigenous American artefacts: a small anthropomorphic greenstone sculpture that belonged to Ulisse Aldrovandi; several bucheri delle Indie and two cocos chocolateros from the Cospian collection; an important group of objects from the Kingdom of Quito and the Amazon, which Pope Benedict XIV donated to the Istituto delle Scienze; and a significant collection of pre-Columbian Andean ceramics that belonged to Pelagio Palagi. A small but remarkable group of Yámana artefacts from Tierra del Fuego was donated by the Bolognese hydrographer Giovanni Roncagli, who took part in an expedition led by Giacomo Bove (1881–1882). From the historic collections of the university (Ateneo) come instead a seventeenth-century Mexican feather mosaic, two half gourds incised with floral motifs, and a fine pair of Eastern Woodlands moccasins from the USA. Recently, the museum has also received from the Soprintendenza a small collection of pre-colonial ceramics from Colombia.

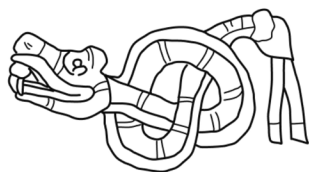
Cultural Areas (tags)

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Eastern Woodlands; Mesoamerica; Northern Andes; Central and Southern Andes;
Amazon; Austral America

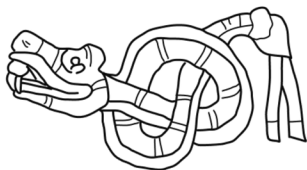
Collection name	University Collections
Collector	Unknown
Cultural areas	Eastern Woodlands
Ethnic group / community / cultural sphere	Iroquois (USA)?
Description of the collection	Pair of leather moccasins decorated with porcupine quillwork and metal cones (Inv. 3096), probably dating to the eighteenth century. Silver cup with a cylindrical stitched tree-bark case (Inv. 2638). Bicchieri in argento con custodia cilindrica in corteccia d'albero cucita (Inv. 2638).
History of the collection	There is no information on how and when the moccasins and the cup entered the university collections, from which they were later transferred to the Museo Civico Medievale from the time of its foundation.
Online database	PatER
Web page	https://bbcc.regione.emilia-romagna.it/pater/loadcard.do?id_card=275989
Bibliography	

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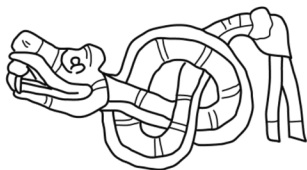
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Collection name	Aldrovandi Collection
Collector	Aldrovandi, Ulisse (1522-1605)
Cultural areas	Mesoamerica
Ethnic group / community / cultural sphere	Otomangue (Mexico)
Description of the collection	Greenstone pendant carved in the form of a human head with headdress ($8.8 \times 5.3 \times 2.2$ cm). It probably dates to the fifteenth–sixteenth century and may have been produced by Otomangue groups in the Mexican regions of Oaxaca or Guerrero.
History of the collection	The pendant is one of the nine “idols” that Ulisse Aldrovandi obtained from Antonio Giganti and illustrated in his <i>Musaeum metallicum</i> , published posthumously in 1648. Because of the headdress Aldrovandi called it <i>idolum pileatum</i> . After Aldrovandi’s death, the object followed the vicissitudes of the whole collection, moving from Aldrovandi’s own house to the Palazzo Pubblico (1605–1742) and then to the Istituto delle Scienze (from 1742). After passing first to the University and then to the Municipality, the object has been housed at the Museo Civico Medievale since the

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	museum's foundation.
Online database	
Web page	
Bibliography	<ul style="list-style-type: none">● Domenici, D. 2022. Rediscovery of a Mesoamerican greenstone sculpture from the collection of Ulisse Aldrovandi, <i>Journal of the History of Collections</i>, 34(1), 2022, pp. 1–22.

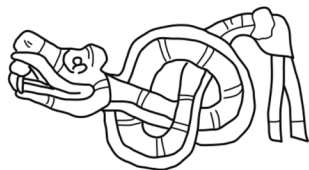
Collection name	Cospi Collection
Collector	Cospi, Ferdinando (1606-1686)
Cultural areas	Mesoamerica
Ethnic group / community / cultural sphere	Tonalá (Guadalajara, Mexico) Colonial New Spanish art (Mexico and Guatemala)
Description of the collection	<ul style="list-style-type: none">● Group of ceramics known as bucheri delle Indie, produced in the region of Tonalá (Guadalajara, Mexico) during the seventeenth century. Made in imitation of Roman terra sigillata, the bucheri were used for their aromatic properties and became the object of the well-known practice of bucherophagy, being ingested in order to obtain

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a yellowing of the skin and other bodily effects. Two coconut cups with silver mounts for drinking chocolate beverages (cocos chocolateros) (Inv. 1950–1951); the light colour of the shells suggests that they come from Guatemala (Juan de Lara, personal communication). The museum’s collection also contains other worked coconut shells (Inv. 1914, 1965) and a small boat-shaped wooden bowl (Inv. 2633) of Cospian provenance, but their American origin is far from certain. Ten dried spherical fruits (described as “Brazilian beans”, probably *Plinia cauliflora*), strung on an iron chain with a ring and red-and-gold tassel. The Brazilian origin of the fruits seems certain, but there is no information about where the object itself was made. By contrast, the repeatedly asserted American origin of a small amber bird (Inv. 1907) can almost certainly be ruled out.

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- The museum's collection also contains other carved coconuts (Inv. 1914, 1965) and a wooden bowl (Inv. 2633) of Cospian origin, but their

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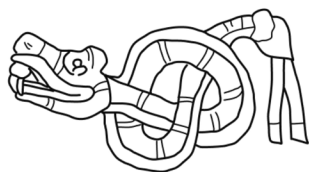
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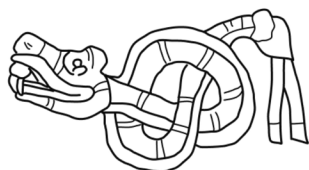
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	<p>American origin is far from certain.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">● Ten dried spherical fruits (described as “Brazil nuts,” probably <i>Plinia cauliflora</i>), strung on an iron chain with a ring and red and gold tassel. The Brazilian origin of the fruits seems certain, but there is no indication of where the object was manufactured.● On the other hand, the repeatedly asserted American origin of a small bird in amber (Inv. 1907) can almost certainly be ruled out.
History of the collection	<p>The artefacts from Ferdinando Cospi’s collection were described by Lorenzo Legati in the Museo Cospiano (1677), as well as in other catalogues of the same collection, but because of the concise descriptions it is often difficult to identify individual objects. Twelve bucheri with a bright red surface seem to belong to Cospi’s collection. Other bucheri in the Museo Civico Medievale—particularly a group of four white-bodied examples and a group of five red-bodied examples fired at low temperature for food use—may instead have a different origin within the university collections. A further group of polychrome ceramics comparable to the bucheri comes from the collection of Pelagio Palagi (see the description of that collection). Although not an Indigenous artefact, it is worth adding that the museum also preserves the wooden chest in which the Inuit</p>

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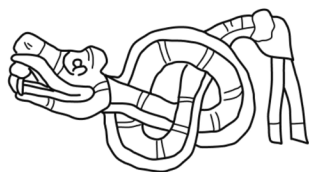
	<p>garment from Greenland that belonged to Ferdinando Cospi—today in the Museo delle Civiltà in Rome—was kept. The chest is decorated with a painting by Angelo Michele Colonna depicting the garment itself, described as a “robe of an Indian priest made of sealskin”.</p> <p>Although not an indigenous artifact, it is worth mentioning that the museum also preserves the wooden box in which the Greenlandic Inuit robe belonging to Ferdinando Cospi was kept, now preserved at the Museum of Civilization in Rome. The box is decorated with a painting by Angelo Michele Colonna depicting the robe itself, described as an “Indian priest's robe made of sea wolf skin.”</p>
Online database	<p>Some of the bucheri can be viewed in PatER, but a larger and typologically more varied number is kept in the museum’s storage.</p>
Web page	<p>https://bbcc.regione.emilia-romagna.it/pater/loadcard.do?id_card=273775</p> <p>https://bbcc.regione.emilia-romagna.it/pater/loadcard.do?id_card=273770</p> <p>https://bbcc.regione.emilia-romagna.it/pater/loadcard.do?id_card=273769</p> <p>https://bbcc.regione.emilia-romagna.it/pater/loadcard.do?id_card=273771</p> <p>https://bbcc.regione.emilia-romagna.it/pater/</p>

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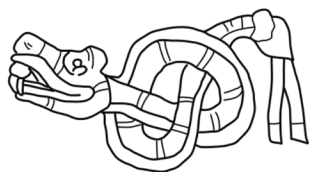
	<p>loadcard.do?id_card=273776</p> <p>https://bbcc.regione.emilia-romagna.it/pater/loadcard.do?id_card=273777</p>
Bibliography	<ul style="list-style-type: none">● Bernardini, C. 1992. Schede di catalogo 43-44. In <i>Bologna e il Mondo Nuovo</i>, ed. L. Laurencich Minelli, 144-146. Bologna: Grafis.● Domenici, D. 2019. "Tasting Clay, Testing Clay. Medicinal Earths, Bucarophagy and Experiential Knowledge in Lorenzo Legati's Museo Cospiano (1677)", <i>Cromohs</i> 22: 1-16.● Filippetti, A. 1992. Schede di catalogo 29, 46-49. In <i>Bologna e il Mondo Nuovo</i>, ed. Laura Laurencich Minelli, 136-137, 146-148. Bologna: Grafis.● Laurencich Minelli, L., A. Filippetti. 1981. "Il museo Cospiano. Alcuni oggetti americani ancora a Bologna", <i>Il Carrobbio. Rivista di studi bolognesi</i>, VII: 220-229.● Laurencich Minelli, L., A. Filippetti. 1983. "Per le collezioni americanistiche del Museo Cospiano e dell'Istituto delle Scienze. Alcuni oggetti ritrovati a Bologna", <i>Archivio per l'Antropologia e l'Etnologia</i>, CXIII.

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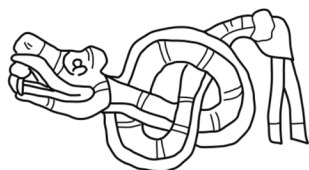
Collection name	University Collections
Collector	Unknown
Cultural areas	Mesoamerica
Ethnic group / community / cultural sphere	P'urépecha (Mexico)
Description of the collection	Feather mosaic (Inv. 1291) with a Christian subject, probably made by P'urépecha artists in western Mexico in the seventeenth century. The mosaic is executed on a copper plate covered with bark paper, on which multicoloured feathers are glued. Saint Bernard, in a white habit with a cross on his shoulder, stands before the Virgin who, within a crown of clouds, holds the Child in her arms. At the saint's feet is the veil of Veronica with the true image of Christ.
History of the collection	It is not known how the feather mosaic travelled from Mexico to Bologna. Its first mention appears in a list compiled by Giacomo Biancani Tazzi on 16 March 1763, where it is recorded as Imago S. Bernardi coram Virgine genuflexi, plumis minutissimis ex perpulchris aviculae, vulgo sunt mexicano Chupa mirtos nuncupatae, depicta, cum argentea theca (Biblioteca Comunale dell'Archiginnasio, Bologna, Fondo Speciale Filippo Schiassi, b. XXXVIII, fasc. 7, Promemorie Varie).

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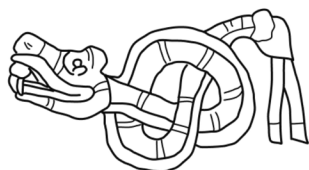
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Online database	PatER
Web page	https://bbcc.regione.emilia-romagna.it/pater/loadcard.do?id_card=275511
Bibliography	<ul style="list-style-type: none">● Domenici, D. 2024. "Ulisse Aldrovandi and Indigenous American Featherwork." <i>Aldrovandiana</i> 3/2: 7-39. https://aldrovandiana.it/article/view/251/245● Filippetti, A. 1992. "Scheda di catalogo 45". In <i>Bologna e il Mondo Nuovo</i>, ed. L. Laurencich Minelli, 146-147. Bologna: Grafis.● Laurencich Minelli, L., A. Filipetti. 1983. "Per le collezioni americanistiche del Museo Cospiano e dell'Istituto delle Scienze. Alcuni oggetti ritrovati a Bologna", <i>Archivio per l'Antropologia e l'Etnologia</i>, CXIII (1983).● Laurencich Minelli, L., "Flight of Feathers in Italian Collections from the Sixteenth and Seventeenth Centuries". In <i>Images Take Flight. Feather Art in Mexico and Europe, 1400-1700</i>, ed. A. Russo, G. Wolf, D. Fane, eds. 218-227.

Collection name	Colombia Collection
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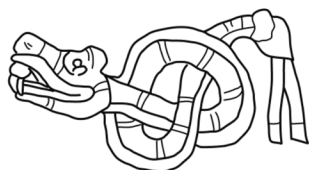
Collector	Unknown
Cultural areas	Northern Andes
Ethnic group / community / cultural sphere	Tumaco–La Tolita (Colombia/Ecuador) Nariño (Colombia/Ecuador) Calima (Colombia)
Description of the collection	<p>Group of fifteen ceramic objects comprising: nine heads and one complete figurine from the Tumaco–La Tolita tradition; five vessels of various shapes, four of them with negative-painted decoration and one with incised decoration, from the Nariño tradition; and a Calima bird-shaped bottle with incised decoration.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">● Nine heads and one whole figurine from the Tumaco-La Tolita area.● Five vessels of various shapes, four of which have negative decoration and one has engraved decoration, from the Nariño area.● One Calima bird-shaped bottle with engraved decoration.
History of the collection	The collection was donated by the Bologna office of the Agenzia Dogane e Monopoli (Italian Customs and

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	Monopolies Agency, ADM) to the Musei Civici d'Arte Antica of the Istituzione Bologna Musei in November 2020, with the prior authorization of the judicial authorities. The objects had in fact been seized as part of criminal proceedings for violation of bans on the import of cultural property.
Online database	
Web page	
Bibliography	<ul style="list-style-type: none">● Naldi, P. 2020. "Nuovi tesori al Medievale di Bologna: terrecotte andine", <i>La Repubblica Bologna</i>, 20 novembre 2020.

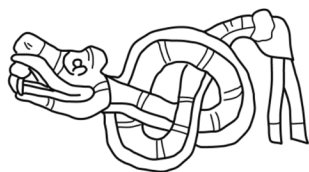
Collection name	Benedict XIV – Istituto delle Scienze di Bologna Collection
Collector	Benedict XIV (Prospero Lambertini) (1675–1758) Brentano, Carlos
Cultural areas	Northern Andes; Amazon
Ethnic group / community / cultural sphere	Various groups living in the Amazonian territories of Peru, Ecuador, and Brazil: Omagua, Yurimagua, Icaguate, Aunala, Urarina, Payagua, Peba, Ticuna, Deassana, Shuar.

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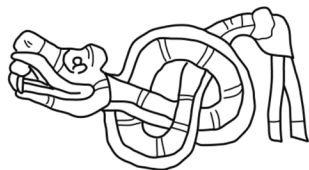
Description of the collection	<p>Group of artefacts coming from various communities living along the course of the Napo and Marañón rivers.</p> <p>Inv. 2634. Stone axe.</p> <p>Inv. 2659. Wooden spear with feathers.</p> <p>Inv. 2663. Staff with rattle.</p> <p>Inv. 2664. Spear.</p> <p>Inv. 3240. Parts of a feathered headdress, feathered bracelet and net bag decorated with feathers.</p> <p>Inv. 3242. Small chest decorated with “Pasto varnish” (mopa mopa, or <i>Elaeagia pastoensis</i>), showing scenes of Indigenous people hunting in the forest and interacting with a Jesuit. It comes from the Kingdom of Quito (Pasto area, present-day Colombia).</p> <p>Inv. 3243. Gourd container.</p> <p>Inv. 3244. Gourd container.</p> <p>Inv. 3245. Gourd container.</p> <p>Inv. 3246. Gourd container.</p>

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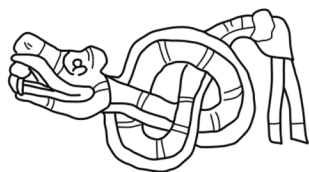
	<p>Inv. 3247. Tobacco inhaler or enema syringe. Inv. 3248. Tobacco inhaler or enema syringe. Inv. 3249. Tobacco inhaler or enema syringe. Inv. 3250. Gourd container. Inv. 3251. Gourd container.</p> <p>Note: it is not clear whether all the objects listed above come from Brentano's gift, or whether some (specifically Inv. 3243–3251) have a different origin.</p> <p>Inv. 2634. Stone axe Inv. 2659. Wooden spear with feathers Inv. 2663. Stick with rattle Inv. 2664. Spear Inv. 3240. Parts of a feathered headdress, feathered bracelet, and feather-decorated net bag. Inv. 3242. Trunk decorated with "Pasto paint" (mopa mopa, or Eleagia Pastoensis), with scenes of indigenous people hunting in the forest interacting with Jesuits. It comes from the Kingdom of Quito (Pasto area, present-day Colombia). Inv. 3243. Gourd container. Inv. 3244. Gourd container. Inv. 3245. Gourd container. Inv. 3246. Gourd container. Inv. 3247. Tobacco inhaler or enema bulb. Inv. 3248. Tobacco inhaler or enema bulb. Inv. 3249. Tobacco inhaler or enema bulb.</p>
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	<p>Inv. 3250. Gourd container.</p> <p>Inv. 3251. Gourd container.</p> <p>Note: it is unclear whether all of the objects listed above were donated by Brentano or whether some (specifically Inv. 3243-3251) have a different origin.</p>
History of the collection	<p>The collection was donated in 1750 to Pope Benedict XIV (the Bolognese Prospero Lambertini) by the Jesuit Carlos Brentano, who had come to Rome from the Kingdom of Quito in order to take part in the General Congregation of the Society of Jesus. As recorded by Giuseppe Gaetano Bolletti in his <i>Dell'origine e dei progressi dell'Istituto delle Scienze di Bologna</i> (1751), Benedict XIV donated the objects to the Istituto delle Scienze di Bologna in 1751. After the donation, the Amazonian collection—one of the oldest of its kind in Italy and Europe—followed the vicissitudes of the Institute's collection down to the present day. In 1878, on the initiative of Luigi Pigorini, part of the objects in the collection were transferred to the Regio Museo Preistorico Etnografico in Rome (today the Museo delle Civiltà), where they are still preserved. As recorded by Giuseppe Gaetano Bolletti in his <i>Dell'origine e dei progressi dell'Istituto delle Scienze di Bologna</i> (1751), Benedict XIV donated the objects to the Institute of Sciences in Bologna in 1751. After the donation, the Amazonian collection, one of the oldest of its kind in Italy and Europe, has followed the history of the Institute's collection to this day. In 1878, on the</p>

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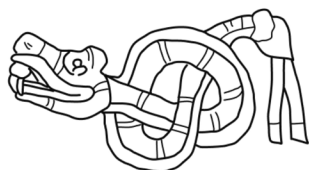
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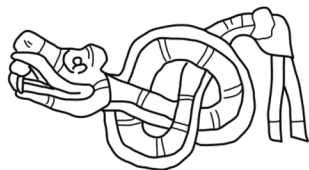
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	initiative of Luigi Pigorini, part of the collection was transferred to the Royal Prehistoric and Ethnographic Museum in Rome (now the Museum of Civilization), where it is still preserved.
Online database	Some objects can be viewed on PatER.
Web page	https://bbcc.regione.emilia-romagna.it/pater/loadcard.do?id_card=82016 https://bbcc.regione.emilia-romagna.it/pater/loadcard.do?id_card=82013 https://bbcc.regione.emilia-romagna.it/pater/loadcard.do?id_card=82008 https://bbcc.regione.emilia-romagna.it/pater/loadcard.do?id_card=82011 https://bbcc.regione.emilia-romagna.it/pater/loadcard.do?id_card=82012 https://bbcc.regione.emilia-romagna.it/pater/loadcard.do?id_card=82004
Bibliography	<ul style="list-style-type: none">● Domenici, D., S. Tacconi. 2025. “Benedetto XIV e le collezioni indigene americane dell’Istituto delle Scienze di Bologna.” In <i>Benedetto XIV e Bologna. Arti e Scienze nell’età dei lumi</i>, eds. F. Citti, I. Graziani, pp. 307-319. Bologna: Pendragon.● Filippetti, A. 1992. Schede di catalogo 27, 28, 30,

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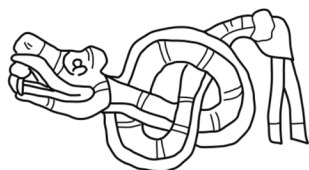
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	<p>31, 32, 81, 82, 83, 84, 85, 86, 87. In <i>Bologna e il Mondo Nuovo</i>, ed. L. Laurencich Minelli, 135-137, 176-179. Bologna: Grafis.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Tacconi, S. 2019. <i>A Jesuit in the Amazon. An 18th century collection of Amazonian objects</i>. Master Thesis, University of Bologna. ● Tacconi, S. 2021. "Benedict XIV's donation of Amazonian objects to the Istituto delle Scienze of Bologna (1751): origins and history." <i>Journal of the History of Collections</i>, 33 (1): 43-55.
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Collection name	University Collections
Collector	Unknown
Cultural areas	Mesoamerica? Northern Andes?
Ethnic group / community / cultural sphere	

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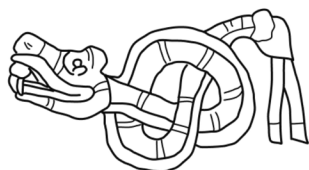
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Description of the collection	Two dried half gourds with the outer surface incised with floral motifs.
History of the collection	The two half gourds come from the university collections, but their exact provenance is unknown. Domenici and Tacconi (2025) have suggested that they may be connected with the gift that the Jesuit Carlos Brentano made to Benedict XIV in 1751, but this attribution is not certain. The typology and comparison with similar objects in other Italian museums nevertheless suggest a dating to the eighteenth century.
Online database	
Web page	
Bibliography	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Domenici, D., S. Tacconi. 2025. "Benedetto XIV e le collezioni indigene americane dell'Istituto delle Scienze di Bologna". In <i>Benedetto XIV e Bologna. Arti e Scienze nell'età dei lumi</i>, eds. F. Citti e I. Graziani, pp. 307-319.

Collection name	Pelagio Palagi Collection
Collector	Palagi, Pelagio (1775-1860)
Cultural areas	Mesoamerica; Central and Southern Andes

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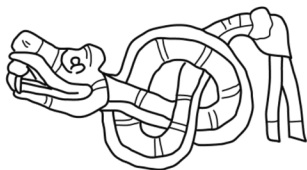
Ethnic group / community / cultural sphere	Moche (Peru) Sicán–Lambayeque (Peru) Chimú (Peru) Chimú–Inka (Peru) Colonial New Spanish art, perhaps from Tonalá (Guadalajara, Mexico)
Description of the collection	<ul style="list-style-type: none">● Thirty-nine ceramic vessels from the north coast of Peru, most of them belonging to the Chimú and Chimú–Inka cultures, with some Sicán–Lambayeque examples and one Moche example. Twelve red-terracotta bowls with polychrome decoration comparable to the bucheri delle Indie, probably of Mexican production.● Twelve red earthenware bowls with polychrome decoration, similar to Indian bucheri ware, probably produced in Mexico.
History of the collection	It is not known how Pelagio Palagi acquired this important group of Peruvian ceramics, which thus constitutes one of the oldest collections of this type of material in Italy. It is possible that Palagi obtained the artefacts during his period of residence in Milan. The

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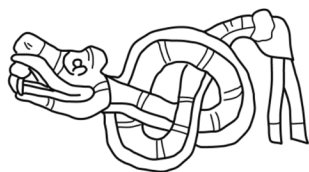
	<p>origin of the group of polychrome bucceri, probably of Mexican origin, is likewise unknown.</p> <p>The origin of the group of polychrome buccero ware, probably of Mexican origin, is also unknown.</p>
Online database	PatER
Web page	https://bbcc.regione.emilia-romagna.it/pater/search.do?value%28OGTF%29=Culture+extraeuropee+-+America&page=1&re=load
Bibliography	<ul style="list-style-type: none">● Laurencich Minelli, L. 1976. "Pelagio Palagi un americanista italiano del sec. XIX". In <i>Atti del Convegno Int. di studi Americanistica in occasione del V centenario di Bartolomè de Las Casas. Genova 10-14 Novembre 1974</i>, 171-174, Genova: AISA.● Laurencich Minelli, L. 1976. "La collezione precolombiana di Pelagio Palagi". In <i>Pelagio Palagi artista e collezionista</i>, 405-412. Bologna: Grafis.● Laurencich Minelli, L. 1989. "Posibilidades expositivas de una pequeña colección del siglo XIX. La colección de cerámicas prehispanicas de Pelagio Palagi". In <i>Collezionismo americanista durante il sec. XIX</i>, Atti del 46° Congresso Internazionale degli Americanisti, Amsterdam 4/8

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	<p>Luglio 1988, <i>Museologia Scientifica</i> VI (1-4): 315-320.</p> <p>● Rossi, C. 1992. Schede di catalogo 112-131. In <i>Bologna e il Mondo Nuovo</i>, ed. L. Laurencich Minelli, 202-213. Bologna: Grafis.</p>
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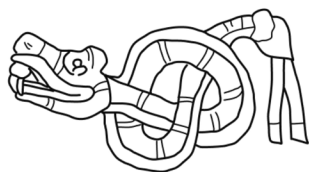
Collection name	Giovanni Roncagli Tierra del Fuego Collection
Collector	Roncagli, Giovanni (1857-1929)
Cultural areas	Austral America
Ethnic group / community / cultural sphere	Yámana (Tierra del Fuego, Argentina)
Description of the collection	<p>Inv. 2646. Necklace of shells on a leather or tendon cord.</p> <p>Inv. 2647. Bird-bone beads on a leather or tendon cord.</p> <p>Inv. 2649. Bone harpoon point.</p> <p>Inv. 2650. Two wooden arrow shafts.</p> <p>Inv. 2652. Model canoe made of bark, with two paddles, two harpoons and two baskets in plant fibres.</p> <p>Inv. 2647. Bird bone beads on leather cord or tendon.</p> <p>Inv. 2649. Bone harpoon tip.</p> <p>Inv. 2650. Two wooden arrow shafts.</p> <p>Inv. 2652. Model canoe made of bark, with two oars, two harpoons, and two baskets made of plant fibers.</p>

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History of the collection	<p>The Bolognese naval officer and hydrographer Giovanni Roncagli took part between 1881 and 1882 in Giacomo Bove's first southern expedition, reaching Tierra del Fuego, where he collected the objects in the collection. After his return to Bologna, in that same year, 1882, Roncagli donated the objects to the city's museums (Tit. XIV, 2-3, prot. 11972 (1982)). Between 1897 and 1914 Roncagli served as secretary general of the Italian Geographical Society.</p>
Online database	
Web page	
Bibliography	

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