

KNOT

KNOWLEDGE OF THINGS:
REASSESSING THE INDIGENOUS
AMERICAN HERITAGE IN ITALY

Museo Nazionale di Ravenna

Via San Vitale, 17, 48121 Ravenna (RA)

Form compiled by: Elisa Emaldi and Paola Novara (Musei nazionali di Ravenna), in collaboration with Davide Domenici.

Introduction

The Museo Nazionale di Ravenna, founded in 1885, is housed in the former monastery of San Vitale. The museum holds rich and varied collections of archaeological finds and applied arts, the oldest nucleus of which goes back to the eighteenth-century collections of the Camaldolese monks of Classe (Ravenna). As regards Indigenous American artefacts, the Museo Nazionale di Ravenna preserves a collection of more than six hundred arrowheads from the Potomac valley, near Washington, D.C. (USA), and three incised gourds whose American provenance is probable but not certain.

Cultural Areas (tags)

Eastern Woodlands; Mesoamerica; Northern Andes

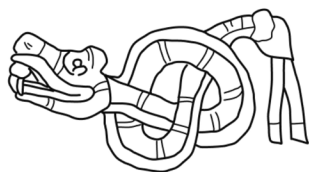
Collection name	North America Collection
Collector	Reynolds, Elmer R. (1863-1911)

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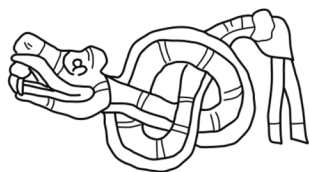
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Cultural areas	Eastern Woodlands
Ethnic group / community / cultural sphere	Nacotchtank/Anacostan (Washington, D.C., USA). Groups of the Potomac, Piscataway, Wicomico and Shenandoah valleys (Washington, D.C., USA).
Description of the collection	A group of 607 arrowheads from the Potomac valley and the adjacent valleys of the Piscataway, Wicomico and Shenandoah.
History of the collection	As recalled by Luciana Martini (1998), the collection – which originally consisted of 693 arrowheads – was donated in 1881 to the Accademia di Belle Arti di Ravenna by the well-known American archaeologist Elmer R. Reynolds, a member of the Anthropological Society of Fine Arts and honorary member of the Accademia di Belle Arti di Ravenna, as well as a donor of American artefacts to several Italian museums. The Accademia di Belle Arti subsequently assigned the collection to what was then the Museo Civico. A report by Reynolds himself was published in the proceedings of the local Accademia di Belle Arti (translated from English by engineer Filippo Lanciani). In the text, Reynolds states that “The collection recently sent to the Accademia di Belle Arti in Ravenna was not made in any particular place; on the contrary, it was in part the result of my research in places very distant from one another. The bulk of the collection was found in the region of the Anacostan Indians, while the remains of the implements

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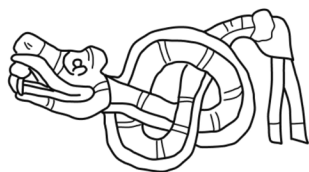
	<p>and tools were gathered in the former territories of the Piscataway, Wicomico and Shenandoah tribes” (Reynolds 1881–82: 99).</p> <p>The 693 arrowheads were first recorded in the Inventory of the civic Classense collections, begun in 1885 when the collections became part of the holdings of the museum, established in that year as a national museum. Subsequently only 386 of the arrowheads were entered in the chronological register of accessions of archaeological objects drawn up in the 1970s, while two more recent inventory checks, carried out in 2007 and 2018, have made it possible to verify the presence of the 607 arrowheads preserved today.</p>
Online database	
Web page	
Bibliography	<ul style="list-style-type: none">● Martini L. 1998. “Materiali di interesse etnografico e reperti di epoca preistorica al Museo Nazionale di Ravenna”, <i>Museo in-forma. Notiziario quadrimestrale del Sistema Museale Provincia di Ravenna</i> 3: 5.● Reynolds, E.R. 1883. <i>Avanzi preistorici nelle vallate del Potomac e dello Shenandoah meridionale</i>. Ravenna: Tip. Calderini.

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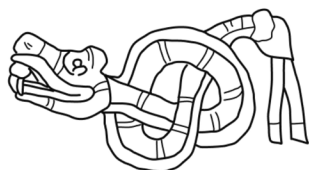
Collection name	Incised Gourds Collection
Collector	Unknown
Cultural areas	Mesoamerica? Northern Andes?
Ethnic group / community / cultural sphere	Unknown
Description of the collection	<p>Three dried half-gourds whose inner surface is covered with lacquer and whose outer surface is blackened and incised. Two are formally very similar, with very dark black lacquer and a yellowish ground: one bears intersecting circular geometric motifs around a central circular element, while the other – larger – displays phytomorphic motifs emerging from a heart-shaped vase. The third gourd, which is typologically different, with a lighter black colour and beige ground, is instead decorated with three floral motifs (the central one surrounded by a serpent), framed by images of animals among which can be recognised a unicorn, a deer, a lion, a griffin and what appears to be a horse.</p> <p>Comparison with similar artefacts preserved in other Italian museums suggests that these are eighteenth-century productions. The place of manufacture is at present unknown, and the attribution to Mesoamerica or the Northern Andes must be regarded as no more than a working hypothesis.</p>

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History of the collection	<p>The three gourds were first recorded in the Inventory of the civic Classense collections of 1885, where it was noted that their provenance was “unknown”. In the same inventory there also appears a coconut with a metal foot, handles and rim – in all likelihood a coco chocolatero of American manufacture – which has now disappeared. The earlier collecting history of the gourds, as well as the manner in which they arrived at what was then the Museo Civico, is unknown.</p>
Online database	
Web page	
Bibliography	<p>Urbinati, F. 2025. “Opere in viaggio da Venezia a Ravenna: la collezione di Anselmo Costadoni (1714-1785) nel monastero di San Michele in Isola”. In <i>Di ritorno da Bisanzio. Da Venezia a Ravenna, dalle collezioni ai musei</i>, ed. S. Moretti, 49-85. Cinisello Balsamo: Silvana Editoriale.</p>

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