



KNOT

KNOWLEDGE OF THINGS:
REASSESSING THE INDIGENOUS
AMERICAN HERITAGE IN ITALY

CAM - Culture and Mission

Via Cialdini 4, 10138 Turin

Form compiled by Elisabetta Gatto (curator)

Introduction

In the very first years of the twentieth century, Blessed Giuseppe Allamano instructed the missionaries in Kenya from the outset to carry out research, document, learn local languages and collect written and oral material. The first purpose was to encourage them to gain an in-depth understanding of the human and social context in which they were working. A second purpose was the need to receive first-hand news from Africa and keep the readers of the sanctuary's magazine informed: those who supported the missions were thus able to learn more about missionary life in those lands. The objects collected among the Kikuyu formed the first core of the collection: wooden grinders for milling millet and sugar cane, weapons, tools, garments. Of all the material gathered, little was saved from the bombing during the Second World War; what could be salvaged was transferred from the Casa Madre in Turin to Cereseto Monferrato (AL).

In those years some missionaries also began to bring together, catalogue and organise what had been spared from the conflict: this became the foundation of the first museum core. On the occasion of the fiftieth anniversary of the Institute's foundation, in 1951, an exhibition on African culture was set up in Turin. At the end of the Jubilee the whole display was used for several years as a travelling exhibition. The need to meet the costs of rebuilding and renovating various seminaries led the then director of

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Propaganda Missionaria to launch a programme of permanent missionary exhibitions, which aimed to offer the Italian public an insight into Eastern and African cultures.

It soon became clear that the most suitable place for a true missionary museum had to be Turin, at the Casa Madre. In an old building that in 1941 had been requisitioned by the Italian government and turned into a military hospital, once refurbished, a space was permanently assigned to the Museo Etnografico e di Scienze Naturali Missioni Consolata. From 1960 onwards the museum was enriched with many craft objects sent from the missions. From 1963 direct purchases also began to be made in the East, in Hong Kong, Japan, India and Morocco. Subsequently the museum underwent a more substantial transformation, with an expansion of its exhibition spaces.

The purchase en bloc of a substantial personal collection belonging to a missionary in the Brazilian Amazon, together with a parallel acquisition of materials concerning pre-Columbian peoples, made it possible to further develop the ethnographic component of the New World section of the museum. In the section devoted to Amazonia, alongside the predominant presence of objects from the Yanomami there are also items from the Tikuna, Tucano, Macuxi, Xapixana and Sateré-Mawé.

Today the CAM – Cultures and Mission, the cultural centre of the Consolata missionaries, inaugurated in 2023, holds around 10,000 ethnographic objects – mainly from Africa and Latin America – together with archaeological finds from different parts of the world. The photographic archive boasts a collection of around one million photographs; particularly valuable are the 23,000 glass plates dating from the early twentieth century, taken by missionaries in Kenya. The film holdings comprise around 1,200 motion-picture films that are now being digitised thanks to the support of the Istituto Nazionale del Cinema d'Impresa in Ivrea. There are also around a thousand maps hand-drawn by missionaries, 200 grammars and dictionaries of the languages of different African and American ethnic groups, and around 900 diaries. The objects

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displayed today along the museum itinerary document the transformation of the missionary model over time: from the idea of progress and “civilisation” to the encouragement of independence from the colonies, from the valuing of local languages and cultures to the defence of ethnic groups threatened with extinction, through to dialogue with believers of different religions.

Cultural Areas (tags)

Mesoamerica; Amazon; Northern Andes; Central and Southern Andes; Gran Chaco

Collections

#01

<i>Name of the collection</i>	Americas
<i>Collector</i>	Istituto Missionari della Consolata
<i>Cultural areas</i>	Mesoamerica; Amazon; Northern Andes; Central and Southern Andes; Gran Chaco
<i>Ethnic group / community / cultural context</i>	<p>Mesoamerica: Aztec, Toltec, groups from Nicaragua and El Salvador.</p> <p>Amazon (Brazil, Venezuela, Colombia): Yanomami, Tikuna, Macuxi, Guayuco, Tucano, Waikas, Coreguaje.</p> <p>Northern Andes (Colombia, Ecuador): Tairona, Sinù, Muisca, Guane, Quimbaya, Calima, Narino, Cuna, Tumaco.</p>

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	<p>Central and Southern Andes (Peru, Chile): Inca.</p> <p>Gran Chaco: Argentina, Paraguay.</p>
<i>Description of the Collection</i>	<p>The American ethnographic collection comprises around 350 objects, mainly from the Amazon region (Brazil, Venezuela, Colombia). These include artefacts such as ornaments, tools, garments, toys, furnishings, ritual objects, musical instruments and weapons. Part of the collection consists of archaeological finds, such as ceramics, ornaments, tools and weapons from the pre-Columbian collection.</p>
<i>History of the collection</i>	<p>The collection began to be assembled in the 1950s and started to be transferred to the Istituto Missionario della Consolata from the 1960s onwards.</p>
<i>Online Database</i>	
<i>Web page</i>	
<i>Bibliography</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none">● Rivista “Andare alle genti”, anno 2024, 78 (1) 7-20.

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