

Art and Inequalities.

—Focusing on the Oriental Art Museum of Turin and on its Efforts to Overcome Cultural Inequalities Caused by Ethnic Differences —

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1. Introduction

“Inequality is defined globally and requires a global response. [...] So where do we learn about what we all have in common or learn to feel a sense of responsibility for groups and problems other than our own? How do we learn to live in increasingly diverse neighborhoods and to connect that experience to people living on the other side of the world? How and where museums help?”. (Peggy Levitt)¹

This paper will deal with cultural inequalities connected to the problem of cross-border migration in northern Italy and on how multicultural art museums can represent a step toward the solution of this problem. In particular I will focus on the activity of the Oriental Art Museum of Turin (Museo d'Arte Orientale, MAO).

Art can be used to overcome ethnic and cultural inequalities which are deeply interconnected with exclusion, isolation and marginalization, and I think that multicultural art museums play an important role in depolarizing these cultural inequalities and narrowing the cultural gap in the age of cross-border migration.

In order to explain how art can be and has been used to overcome ethnic and cultural inequalities, I will bring forward a concrete example speaking about the activities promoted by the MAO. The MAO is the most recent museum of Oriental art opened in Italy and hosts a large collection of artworks coming, for instance, from Gandara, India, China, Japan, Tibet and areas of Islamic culture. Its importance lays not only in its permanent collection but, as far as it concerns this paper, also in its effort to organize temporary exhibitions, as well as to run didactic activities and laboratories which aim at introducing and explaining various aspects of cultures belonging to different ethnic groups, contributing therefore to foster the process of integration between immigrants and the local people of Turin.

However, before explaining the activity of the MAO, I will briefly take the stock of the situation about the immigration in Italy and more specifically in Turin where the MAO is located.

2. Italy and Immigration

2.1 Overview

Since its unification in 1861, Italy has been subject to the phenomenon of emigration toward foreign countries rather than a phenomenon of immigration, with a peak between 1901 and 1915 and another between 1951 and 1965.² However, starting from the end of the seventies and during the eighties, the migration flow begins to change and Italy has started facing a period of increasing immigration, due also to the absence of strict laws (compared to other countries) regarding immigration policies. Nowadays, as confirmed by the data recorded by the ISTAT in 2017 and 2018³, we can say that Italy has become a multiethnic country which the presence of immigrants from almost fifty different countries. The largest communities are Romanian, Albanian, Moroccan, Chinese, and Ukrainian, followed by the Filipino and Indian communities.

- Italian areas with a major number of immigrants:

A 2018 ISTAT survey on the distribution of legally-registered immigrants on the Italian peninsula points out that the 33.6% of immigrants lives in the North-west, the 23.9% in the North-east and a 25.4% in Central Italy, while the Southern regions host just a half of the immigrants living in the Northern regions (12.2%). This kind of distribution is probably due also to the fact that the North is characterized by greater welfare compared to the South and it represents the immigrants' gateway to Europe.

- Religious situation:

Regarding the religion situation in Italy, the ISTAT ascertained that up to 2012 that 56.4% of the population belongs to the Christian community, 26.3% to the Muslim community (mainly from Morocco and Albania) and 3% follows Buddhism (mainly Chinese people). Therefore, we can say that the Muslim and the Chinese communities are a strong component of the Italian population. Moreover, concerning children's religious education, 41% of children follow Muslim religion and just 37% is educated according to Christian principles.⁴

- Financial situation of regularly registered immigrants:

According to another survey of the ISTAT for the Ministry of Employment, conducted in the years 2008 and 2009,⁵ three-quarters of the regular immigrants in Italy come for work-related reasons. Other reasons that lead immigrants to enter Italy are the desire to be reunited with their family that arrived years before (29.5%), studying abroad (just 2.7%) or avoiding persecution or poverty in their country of origin (4.2%).

The income of migrants, calculated on an annual basis, is about 14,469 euro (1,715,430 yen), about 56% of the income earned by Italian families. To give some examples, Indian families earn 48% of the average Italian family, a Moroccan family 50.3% and a Filipino family 59.2%. The fact that they receive an income lower than that of an average Italian family reflects the fact that they usually do less qualified work (no academic titles). However, it is significant that some of them succeeds in becoming self-employed, opening their own businesses.

- School situation:

The presence of non-Italian students within the Italian education system is growing stronger and stronger: if we look at the results of a survey conducted by the Ministry of Education, University and Research (MIUR) in 2016~2017⁶ we can see how the percentage of immigrant children in Italian schools has skyrocketed: 196,414 students enrolled in 2001 against the 826,091 enrolled during the 2016~2017 school year. The number has increased fourfold, and the Chinese and Indians are among the families with the highest rates of minors⁷

Turin, the regional capital of Piedmont, situated in the northwest of Italy less than two hours from the French frontier and from the Mont Blanc massif, was the first capital of Italy from its unification (1861) until 1865. After yielding the title of capital to Florence, it became an industrial city, producing mainly cars, as well as military equipment during the two world wars. It soon became a focus for immigrants coming from Northeast and Southern Italy and then for immigrants from other nations.

Nowadays, as far as it concerns cross-country migration, it is evident there is a large migration flow toward Italy and, as I pointed out in the previous passage, the highest rate of immigrants in Italy is recorded in the Northern and Central regions and the regular immigrants constitute a significant 10% of the local population (mainly concentrated in the provincial capitals rather than in the rural areas). In just the northwest of Italy the ISTAT recorded 1,764,305 residents of non-Italian nationality.

In 2018 Piedmont ranked fifth, after the Lombardia, Lazio, Emilia Romagna and Veneto regions, with 450,623 regular immigrants, 9.68% of the population of the entire region and an increase of 1.1% compared to the previous year.

Between 2017 and 2018 a list of Italian cities with a major presence of regularly registered immigrants has been drawn up and Turin (as of January 2018) ranks third after Rome and Milan. Moreover, according to the ISTAT data regarding the city of Turin, as of 1st January 2019, the presence of immigrants in Turin amounts to 133,099 people, that is to say 15.2% of its inhabitants⁸: the majority (51.8%) of them come from Europe (mainly from Romania: 38.5% of the total amount of immigrants, but they are decreasing compared to ten years ago), but there is also a large component (26.41%) coming from regions of Islamic culture (like Morocco, with 12.5%) and 12.88% coming from Asia (with a predominance of Chinese: 5.6% but also from Pakistan, India, Iran, Afghanistan, Japan and Thailand).⁹

3. The Oriental Art Museum of Turin: About Its Collection, Its Purpose and Its Achievements

3.1 About the MAO Collection

Within this context, the Museum of Oriental Art of Turin opened in 2008. It was not a sudden decision. Turin has a long academic history in the study of Oriental art and culture, and a collection of Oriental masterpieces already existed and was hosted at the Museo Civico di Arte Antica (City Museum of Ancient Art) along with Roman and Greek art. However, in 2001 a project to enlarge this collection started and thanks mainly to the efforts of the former Director of the MAO, Franco Ricca, the Fondazione Musei and the City of Turin, the collection, including works belonging to the former Museo Civico, the Region and the Giovanni Agnelli Foundation, was relocated and the MAO was born.¹⁰ Its new home is Palazzo Mazzonis, a historical building in the center of the renowned Quadrilatero Romano, an area situated in the core of Turin and adjacent to the Porta Palazzo market which hosts Europe largest open-air multi-ethnic market.

Palazzo Mazzonis, which dates back at least to the second half of the seventeenth century (according to the earliest sources about it that we have), was once owned by the Solaro della Chiusa and Solaro della Margherita, two of the most influential families of the Piedmontese

aristocracy.¹¹ After many transfers of propriety, it had been used as the new Judicial Offices venue since the 1980s, and after undergoing restoration between 2004 and 2008, it opened as MAO.

Nowadays the MAO boasts a collection of some 3700 pieces representing ancient cultures belonging to the Far East (such as China and Japan), South East Asia (such as Cambodia, Thailand, Myanmar), the Indian subcontinent, Tibet, South-Central Asia (Afghanistan, Pakistan), Central and Western Asia (Iran) and to some Mediterranean areas (Turkey and Egypt).

3.2 Purpose of the MAO Collection

The purpose of the Mao Collection is well explained in an article posted on the website of the National Trust for Italy (Fondo Ambiente Italiano or FAI), a private non-profit organization that aims at protecting and spreading awareness of some Italian cultural and artistic assets (churches, castles) which might otherwise be lost.

Being born thanks to the great commitment and deep interest in Asian art of the above-mentioned Director and Organizations, the MAO performs an important role in the multiethnic reality of Turin. As the FAI states: “The creation of the new Oriental Art Museum aims at promoting frequent contacts between Turinese and the cultures of Asia through artistic production. [...] The artworks and the related captions underline contact points and creative interactions amongst different countries”.¹² It appears from this article there is a will to overcome cultural and ethnic differences through dialogue which uses art as a mean of communication. This policy reflects the thought of the eminent seventeenth century physician and collector Sir Hans Sloane as far as it concerns the idea of a museum which enables visitors to recognize that people around the world had a lot in common; policy inherited also by the British Museum and explained by its former director, Neil MacGregor (in office 2002-2015) who underlined the attempt of the British Museum to create a citizen who would be a citizen of the world, able to both compare what happens in the different parts of it and to see how connected they are. Not everyone agrees that museums can create citizens, either national or global, preferring instead, as James Cuno (Director of the Art Institute of Chicago until 2011), to underline the role of the museum as an entity that collects and presents facts and opposes

prejudice and superstition. Moreover, there are also eminent scholars, as James Clifford (Emeritus Professor in the History of Consciousness Department, University of California, Santa Cruz), who describe museums as contact zones not simply between unequal cultural producers and consumers but also, at a broader level, between multilayered, unequal networks created by individuals, institutions and governance structures. In any case, even if each scholar sees and conceives the role of the museums from a different perspective, what emerges from their point of view is the importance of the contact with different cultures, contact that can lead eventually to the breakdown of inequalities between different communities.

On 4th December 2018, on the occasion of the tenth anniversary of its founding, the event “Dieci Anni d’Oriente” (Ten Years of the Orient) opened at the MAO for almost one week, celebrating the fact that in ten years this museum had become one of the largest museums of Oriental art in Italy and has made efforts to show the complex world of Oriental art and philosophy to European people. In this occasion, according to an interview posted by the Web journal Fanpage.it¹³, the current director, Marco Guglielminotti Trivel, declared: “I have been working at the MAO since 2006, even before its opening. [...] The MAO opened in 2008 on 4th December, and now it is considered one of the most important in Italy and one of the largest in Europe for the knowledge, the exchange, the discovery of and the study of Asian art. [...]”. The interview goes on, underlining how the event “Dieci Anni d’Oriente” is a way to increase the visibility of the MAO and to further enhance its future and its internationalization. Director Trivel adds: “In the future, I would like to concentrate on the internationalization of the museum and to expand its connections outside Italy. Moreover, I would like to enhance the relationships between this area and the foreigner communities, an activity that already started in previous years. We are also preparing a fascinating and original exhibition about the relationship between art and Islamic culture, centred on the theme of water. For this purpose, we are looking forward to exchanges with the Emirates. [...]”.¹⁴

From the director`s statement too, I think that it is clear the will of creating an international and cosmopolitan environment through cultural and artistic knowledge exchange, and of deepening the relations among Turin and the increasing number of foreigners living in the city. Every city has a *cultural armature*, write Peggy Levitt¹⁵, consisting in its history, institutions, and social and cultural policies: this armature, containing the city`s ideas about community,

equality and so on, continuously echoes in the ways things get done and therefore it is reflected also in the museum's policies and in the way in which their collections are displayed. This relation, at first glance, could be represented by a one-directional arrow going from the city to its institutions. However, I think that there is also the possibility of representing this relationship with a double-headed arrow, when it happens that the institution (museum) also affects the city's *cultural armature* with its policy. It is the case, for instance, of multicultural art museums that, with their policy of enhancing cultural connections with other countries, promoting artistic dialogue and striving to erase inequalities, contribute to change the core, the armature of the city itself. As many museum professionals around the world have recognized, museums wield tremendous power in shaping public views and even influencing people who never cross their thresholds, therefore they have a good chance of success in standing against inequalities.

3.3 The Achievements of the MAO

Since its opening, the MAO has been making steady progress. 2015 and 2016 have been two meaningful years regarding the results of its activity. In 2015 the MAO has become one among the 1.8% of the Italian museums to exceed the threshold of 100,000 visitors a year (100,231), with an increase of 145% compared to the previous year.¹⁶ This result is also due, along with some important exhibitions¹⁷ and various activities planned that year, to the strengthening of the relations with organizations internationally recognized and to the collaboration with the National Geographic magazine which contributed to boost the internationalist policy of the museum.

In 2016 the number of visitors continued growing by another 32%, which means that thanks to the exhibitions and activities of the MAO, more people have become interested in the cultural and artistic world of Asia: it is an important step to raise the consciousness of the value and the richness that the presence of different cultures represents and an attempt to eliminate ethnic inequalities through cultural activities.

4. The MAO and Its Intercultural Activities: Overcoming Cultural Inequalities.

Now I will explain the MAO's activities. As I mentioned above, the MAO boasts a collection of some 3700 pieces, displayed periodically in five areas according to their origin. In

order to foster an understanding of these artworks, the director and the staff of the museum have drawn up various plans.

1. Detailed captions explaining each artwork.
 - 2.1 Tours of the five galleries with a guide who will talk about the collection and explain the main points of the artwork to the visitors.
 - 2.2 Tours that focus on how the same theme has been interpreted by artists of different countries.
 - 2.3 More detailed tours of just one or two galleries.
3. Conferences held by experts to further explore Asian culture.
4. Initiatives that involve foreign communities.
5. Other activities such as concerts, or guided tours along with tea tasting experiences.
6. Temporary Exhibitions.
7. Activities and laboratories for children, schools, adults and people with disabilities, that aim at educating children on Asian art through a concrete experience by helping them to create their own artwork. These activities bring people closer to their own or to a different culture (“their own culture” in case of immigrant children who attend laboratories about the art of the country they come from).
8. Possibility of renting part of the museum for catered private events.

Now I will show some of the most relevant initiatives among these points, pointing out also the reason why they worth to be taken into consideration as examples of activities that enhance dialogue among different ethnic groups, contributing to bringing down cultural and ethnic inequalities. In particular, I will focus on points number 4, 6 and 7.

4. Initiatives that involve foreigner communities:

Understanding of cultural diversity is necessary to tear down cultural inequality: in this respect the initiatives based on cross-cultural themes that involve foreigner communities constitute an important activity carried out by the MAO.

Among them, it is worth noting the participation of the Oriental Museum in the Indian festival of *Divali* which the city of Turin has been holding at the Borgo Medievale every year in October since 2010. *Divali* is one of the most important festivals in India and it represents the victory of light over darkness. The word *divali* comes from the Sanskrit *deepavali* where *deepa*

means “light” and *avail* means “row,” therefore “a row of lights”. Because of its meaning, this festival is felt by many people even if they belong to different religions. This festival constitutes an opportunity of integration of Indian traditions in the social context of Turin and promotes cultural exchanges between the Indian community resident in Turin, associations and people linked to India by cultural or emotional bonds, and the local people. During this festival, the MAO organizes guided tours and gallery talks with professors of Turin University that are experts in the philosophies, religions and history of India and Central Asia to help people understand the meaning and the significance of the *Divali* festival and discover myths and gods of the Hindu religion, aiming in general at deepening Turinenses’ knowledge and understanding of Indian art and culture. These initiatives are accompanied by readings of Indian texts along with *sitar* (a musical instrument originated from the Indian subcontinent) performances.

Another important initiative is the participation in the celebration of the Chinese New Year held this year on the 3rd of February, which involves the Chinese community. As in previous years, the MAO has taken part in this event and, with the collaboration of the General Consulate of the People’s Republic of China, the Istituto Confucio of the University of Turin and the East China Normal University of Shanghai, has set up, for instance, the exhibition “Ricami di Carta” (Paper Embroidery) about the art of paper-cutting. Moreover, during the exhibition, conferences were held about the creation of paper in China by professors of the University of Shanghai. All these initiatives, along with the celebration of the Chinese New Year, clearly aim at creating contact points between the large Chinese community of Turin and the Italian people, exactly as in the case of the abovementioned celebration of *Divali*.

Regarding the Muslim community, the MAO collaborates with the CTPs, the Cross-cultural Center, organizations that deal with refugees and that bring their groups to the museum, and with cultural associations to strengthen bonds between residents and Muslims. For instance, with the cultural association called Equilibri d’Oriente the MAO has been organizing the “OrienTO” festival every November since 2016. The project OrienTO was born (as the association Equilibri d’Oriente explains on its website¹⁸) from the desire to deepening various aspects of the Middle East culture, presenting points of view which do not belong to the mainstream and that tell us about stories, traditions, experiences which dialogue between past and present and go beyond the mere geographical context. During this festival, on the one hand,

the MAO, with various activities focused on its collection of artworks linked to the Islamic culture, offers a starting point for the dialogue between different cultures, while on the other hand, the association of young Muslims (mainly Italian citizens belonging to the second generation of immigrants) will bring its point of view from the inside of the Islamic world. In particular, the collaboration between the young generation of Muslims with Italian citizenship and the curators of the MAO aims at creating an event for everyone, an event which helps to deepen the knowledge about the Museum and the culture of the Middle East overall among the young generations and contributes to breaking down ethnic barriers and cultural inequalities.

6. Temporary exhibitions:

Temporary exhibitions focused on particular artistic aspects of one or more areas of Asia have been organized since the opening of the museum. I cannot list them all, therefore I will mention just some of them, pointing out their relevance in spreading the message of overcoming ethnic inequalities and prejudices.

I will start with the exhibition “Safar Viaggio in Medio Oriente, Vite Appese a un Filo” (Safar: Journey into the Middle East. Lives Hanging on by a Thread) held between March 20th and June 30th, 2019. It presents about sixty photographs that the author, the journalist and scholar Farian Sabahi, took in countries such as Iran, Iraq, the United Arab Emirates, and elsewhere between 1998 and 2005. To understand the meaning of this exhibition it is significant the fact that her photographic journey through these countries starts and ends with the lines of the 13th century Persian poet Rumi. In fact, at the beginning of the exhibition appears the poem “Even if you have no feet, choose to make a journey into yourself”, lines which, according to the MAO itself, underline the importance of journeys and opening to other cultures within a process of personal growth: that is exactly a teaching designed to overcome inequalities. At the end of the exhibition we could find another few lines of Rumi: “I am nor from the East or from the West/ I set aside the duality/I saw the two worlds as one”, lines which reject the contraposition between the Eastern and Western worlds, implying that there is not one world better than the other, but they are the same, erasing any form of inequality.

From August to September 2017, the exhibition “Innovi Cultura” took place at the MAO. This exhibition was born as a result of a collaboration between the professors and the students

of the Chinese Institute for the Communication of Shanxi. The students were invited to exhibit works representing both the culture inherited from their ancestors and the innovation brought by today's culture. This initiative created an opportunity for dialogue not only between the younger and the older generations within the Chinese community but also between young Italians and the Chinese community itself through the world of fashion, one with a strong presence in Italy.

Between 2012 and 2013 the MAO proposed an exhibition about the mirrors of ancient China and Japan: "Riflessi d'Oriente", the first in Italy of this genre. This exhibition displayed artwork from the 6th century B.C. onwards, artwork that provided a glimpse into the conception of the universe in ancient China. The concept of the mirror had been developed in China far more than in western countries: Chinese mirrors take into consideration not only their reflective side but also the rear part, which is often decorated with profound symbology of the universe which reflects the high degree of development of ancient Chinese culture. This element contributed to making visitors reflect upon the differences and parallels between the Orient and the West, opening an opportunity for dialogue between two different cultures now coexisting in the same territory.

7. Activities and laboratories for children and adults:

To promote knowledge of Asian culture, the MAO has created also many laboratories, mainly for children: among them it worth mentioning for instance is "Segni di Carta" (held also in November 2018) during which children, after visiting the gallery dedicated to Islamic art and having seen some of the decorative patterns used in the artworks exhibited, can create their masterpiece based both on their power of imagination and on the geometrical patterns and arabesques that appear in the works they have just seen.

Another activity dealing with the use of paper is the creation of *origami*, folding paper, in the traditional Japanese way. After visiting the gallery dedicated to Japan, the children can reproduce the traditional helmet (*kabuto*) of *samurai* armour or animals like butterflies seen in the scrolls of famous painters.

The laboratories for Arabic and Japanese calligraphy are two other interesting activities which let children explore the Asian world and culture. During these two laboratories, the children experience writing their names in another language, learning in a practical way that

other writing systems exist which use characters completely different from the Italian one. I taught the classes interested in Japanese writing and together we wrote our name in Japanese using the *katakana* syllabary. I noticed that, even if most of them said it was difficult, no one has ever said that Italian or English writing was actually better. On another occasion, I accompanied the children in the gallery dedicated to Islamic regions where tiles decorated with lines from the Koran were exhibited. There, speaking about the Arabic calligraphy, I asked the children (it was a middle school) if any of them could read the letters or the sentences reproduced on the tiles. Immediately some of them, mainly from Morocco, raised their hands enthusiastically. Then, in turn, they read all the sentences or at least recognized some letters. I had also some materials with me, including a table with the Arabic letters of the alphabet. Again, I asked some of them to read it aloud. They all felt proud to demonstrate their knowledge of something that the other children did not know and to show that something related to their culture was worthy of being exhibited in a museum. This created an opportunity of dialogue between Italian children born from an Italian family and, for example, Italian children born from a Moroccan family.

Again, MAO, in order to bring children closer to a different culture, organizes activities all during summer: for instance, during summer 2019 the activities proposed were “The Shape of Water” in which they can explore the meanings of water in Islamic culture and decorate tiles with water motifs; “Shaping clay” activity during which children, after visiting the Chinese gallery, can produce their own earthenware; “*Spiceality*” planned to bring children and adults into the world of spices, herbs and aroma used mainly in India, Southeast Asia and Islamic regions, letting them experience different cultures using their sense of smell; or again the “Perfumes and Colours of the Orient” activity during which children can choose among the galleries dedicated to South Asia, South-east Asia, China and the Regions of Islamic Culture, which present works dealing with this subject: after having learned about the context and place of origin of these artwork, children will use spices, coffee and teas to create their own “perfumed” masterpiece.

All these activities aim at entertaining and amusing children, giving them the possibility to get closer to and get into a dialogue with different cultures. They boast also dialogue between classmates of different ethnic groups, as in the case of the calligraphy laboratory. This is

fundamental in terms of tearing down inequalities, as they can learn that there is no one superior culture, just different cultures, and they can see concrete parts of different cultures that usually are just learnt in books.

5. Conclusion

With this paper I explained how art can constitute a countermeasure against cultural inequalities, giving concrete examples and writing about the activities of the Oriental Art Museum of Turin. Turin is a city characterized by a high rate of immigration and can therefore be defined a multicultural and multiethnic city. Within this context, ethnic discrimination and cultural inequalities between immigrants and local people can easily arise. However, deepening an understanding of other cultures is a means to avoid or at least lessen these inequalities, and it can be also realized starting from an artistic viewpoint. In this sense, the efforts of multicultural artistic museums like the MAO can be considered an important example. The will of the MAO to overcome cultural and ethnic differences through a dialogue which uses art as a mean of communication should be clearly apparent from this paper. Within the concept of “art” are included not only artwork such as paintings or sculptures, but also laboratories and activities concerning music, foods and aromas that project visitors into other cultures with all their senses so that they can understand not just with their eyes but also with their ears, nose and mouth that there is not one superior taste, music or aroma but just different tastes, aromas or music, therefore promoting the elimination of cultural inequalities through the use of all senses.

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