



Objects from voyages of Exploration: the James Cook Collection in Florence

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Abstract. The Cook collection of the Museum of Anthropology and Ethnology in Florence includes objects belonging to the cultures of Polynesia, Melanesia and the North-West Coast of North America. The importance of these artifacts is increasingly recognized not only by curators, ethnologists and artists, but also by historians. In this contribution we retrace the history of its rediscovery in the 19th century, and the studies of the 20th century which confirmed its attribution and expanded knowledge. Finally, we reflect on the contents, methods of communication and the future potential of this collection.

Keywords: ethnology, museology, Enrico H. Giglioli, Adrienne Kaeppler.

INTRODUCTION

The Cook collection housed in the Museum of Anthropology and Ethnology in Florence includes almost 200 objects belonging to the cultures of Polynesia, Melanesia and the north-west coast of North America. Following mainly a geographical criterion the objects are exhibited in two rooms, one dedicated to the great north, and the other to the Pacific islands.

The extraordinary Cook collection is emblematically linked to major historical events. James Cook's exploration brought both great changes to Europe and began the destructive impact of Pacific populations with Europe (Surdich, 2015).

Cook's systematic exploration of the Pacific, driven mainly by French and English expansionist interests, represented a significant step forward in respect to the preceding eras of geographical discovery. All phases of

each of Cook's three voyages were characterized by a transition to scientific exploration. Thorough and meticulous preparations were made for precise rigorous, and methodical collection of both knowledge and objects (Surdich, 2014). Results were acquired and disseminated through study and research by specialists in various disciplines working closely together to paint a rich and detailed picture of the explored territories and the populations encountered. Within just a few decades, this event revolutionized the European vision of the Pacific territories and populations it contained. James Cook (1728-1779) played a primary role in this enterprise. After the endeavours of John Byron, Samuel Wallis, Philip Carteret and Louis-Antoine de Bougainville, Cook led three expeditions of enormous scientific value into the vast Pacific area between 1768 and 1775. He left thousands of pages of diaries and logbooks as well as countless masterfully drawn maps which would prove indispensable to the success of subsequent expeditions (Surdich, 2014).

These objects are a precious historical heritage representing the achievements of the culture of the peoples of the Pacific, before the impact with James Cook or other Europeans changed their lives. Their importance is increasingly recognized not only by curators, ethnologists and artists but also by historians (Hand, 2015; Pollitt, 2019; Tamburini *et al.*, 2020).

TRACING HISTORY

The Museum of Anthropology and Ethnology in Florence was established by Paolo Mantegazza in 1869 as a National Museum. Paolo Mantegazza, considered the founder of the Italian anthropology (Monza 1831 - Lercici 1910), was a very influential figure in Italy, and also well connected internationally (Landucci, 1887; Puccini, 1991; Barsanti and Barbagli, 2010; Bigoni, 2022).

The museum represents today a very complex Florentine heritage accumulated over four centuries and from many geographical areas. The first group of objects in the museum came from the Imperial and Royal Museum of Physics and Natural History, founded in Florence by the Grand Duke Pietro Leopoldo in 1775. It was located in Palazzo Torrigiani, in via Romana, and called by the Florentines *La Specola*.

Over the next three decades the Museum of Anthropology and Ethnology grew quickly and became an internationally respected institution. On 30 April 1901 an extraordinary meeting was held to celebrate the XXX anniversary of the foundation of the *Società Italiana di Antropologia e Etnologia* and the university jubilee of Prof. Mantegazza. In his speech, Ettore Regalia gave great importance to the Cook collection and its most prominent scholar, Enrico H. Giglioli (Fig. 1):

Among the ethnological collections the following groups deserve to be particularly pointed out. First of all, the one coming from the collections made by the famous Cap. Cook during his third exploration trip (1777-79), and so learnedly illustrated by Prof. Giglioli: all the objects that compose it are precious, given their antiquity, and some are almost unique: to indicate just one, the strange «Heva» (Translated by Regàlia 1901, 15).

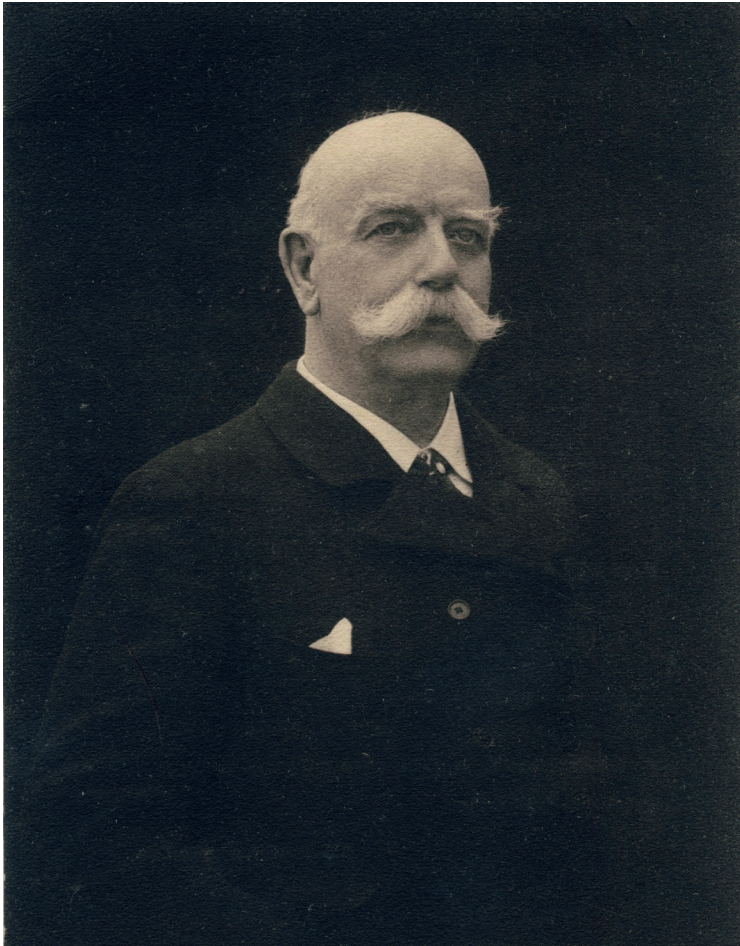


Fig. 1. Portrait of Prof. Enrico H. Giglioli (Private Collection F. Barbagli).

Enrico Giglioli and his studies on the Cook collection

Enrico Giglioli's meticulous studies allowed him not only to securely attribute objects to the Cook expeditions but also to detail their origin from different geographical areas and cultures. It is clear from the historical catalogs and the literature that, before Giglioli's studies, little was known

about the history and origin of many objects now recognized as part of the Cook collection. For example, Paolo Riccardi (1854-1924) published in 1879 his study on the objects of the Florentine museum connected to fishing *with certain human races*. He illustrated fishing hooks generically as *belonging to Polynesia [...] but their origin it is not precisely known* (Riccardi, 1879, 42).

Giglioli was born in London to an exiled Italian patriot and an English mother. He studied at the Royal School of Mines with T.H. Huxley between 1861 and 1863 where he became acquainted with the cultural group around Charles Darwin and the debate on the theory of evolution. Filippo De Filippi, one of the first academic exponents of Darwinism in Italy, wanted him to participate in his scientific voyage around the world promoted by the newly proclaimed Kingdom of Italy. De Filippi died during the voyage aboard the steam corvette «Magenta», and Giglioli remained the sole scientific director of the mission. At little more than 20 years of age, but already endowed with rare experience and great expertise, he had no difficulty in finding an academic position. In 1869 started teaching Zoology and Vertebrate Comparative Anatomy in Florence's Istituto di Studi Superiori Pratici e di Perfezionamento. Two years later, in 1871, he became Temporary Professor of Zoology and Vertebrate Comparative Anatomy, and later Full Professor and director of the collections in 1874. In 1875, after taking charge of the museum's vertebrate collections, located at *La Specola*, he founded a special collection of Italian vertebrates. In 34 years of activity, Giglioli put together 35,000 specimens belonging to 1235 of the 1250 species then known for the Italian fauna. The extraordinary development of the Central Collection and its degree of completeness were due to its director's ability to create an extensive network of relationships with Italian zoologists, as well as his excellent reputation among ministry officials, who helped him with economic aid and official recognition.

Under Giglioli's direction, the general collections of the various vertebrate classes also increased considerably. This was a direct result of his skill in contacting the directors of the most important museums in the world, proposing exchanges and purchasing rare or recently discovered material.

According to the habit of the time, sending duplicate specimens of the collections in order to acquire valuable specimens was common. With the collaboration of the Ministry of Public Education, he even managed to have the title of Cavalier of the Crown of Italy conferred on an ambitious Australian zoologist in exchange for dugongs, echidnas, platypuses and other Oceanic rarities (Barbagli, 2009).

Even if Giglioli is mostly remembered as a zoologist, he had an enormous impact in the establishment of the Museum of Anthropology and Ethnology (Barbagli, 2014). His role in the acquisition, study and dissemination of

knowledge about the collections, is vividly emerging in recent works about ethnological and anthropological collections of the Florentine museum (Bigoni *et al.*, 2019a, 2019b; Dionisio *et al.*, 2020; Bigoni and Roselli, 2021). He was active in assembling a very extensive private collection, started in 1883. The purpose of this private collections was to illustrate artifacts of the «Age of Stone». Following a mainstream idea of his century, this kind of documentation included artifacts and tools from contemporary populations still «trapped» in prehistoric times (Giglioli, 1901).

We know from the *Rendiconti della Società Italiana* regularly reported on the *Archivio* (Journal of the Italian society founded by Mantegazza), that Giglioli gave an important scientific communication during an assembly of the Society on 10th of January 1892:

Prof. Giglioli makes a preliminary communication on some studies he has undertaken [...], concerning many ethnographic objects in the Florence Museum, and which were located since 1793, and perhaps even earlier, in the ancient Museum of the Specola. By examining the drawings and descriptions of the famous navigator Cook and comparing them with those objects, he was able to correct many false indications, made by ignorant scribes in the various Catalogs. These objects are very precious, because they were collected by Cook himself on his third journey (1776-80) [...]. Prof. Giglioli continues his research, proposing to present to his colleagues, when he has completed it, the completed illustration of this precious collection.

Paolo Mantegazza himself thanked Prof. Giglioli *to have determined the origin, and thus discovered the great value, of the objects themselves. He did not have the means to make the historical critique that Prof. Giglioli is now making* (translated from Regàlia, 1892, 568).

In the museum *La Specola* the objects then defined as *Utensils of the barbarian nations* received a rather confused and certainly less accurate treatment, in contrast to the cataloging and conservation effort dedicated to scientific collections of different nature (Contardi, 2002). Giglioli started his research from poor documents and no catalogues pointing to the real origin of the artifacts. Apparently, many of Giglioli's ideas had begun to be formed many years before. In 1881, Giglioli reported on many European museums that he personally visited that year. In the detailed description of the admired museum in *Copenagha*, he wrote:

Here I saw a classic-shaped helmet and a royal cloak covered with the red feathers of the Drepanis and a large arm-handled ax perfectly identical to one that has been kept in our Museum for years and that was purchased with other objects brought back from the third and unfortunate journey of Captain Cook (translated from Giglioli, 1881, 121).

After his 1881 conference at the Society, as promised, Giglioli completed his research. It was later published in two sections (1893 and 1895) on the *Archivio*. In these publications Giglioli validated his hypothesis through comparison with Cook collections from other European Museums and using historical sources and information left by Cook himself. He followed effective and surprisingly modern comparative methods. In the articles Giglioli retraced the accounts of Cook's third and last journey, and attributed the various artifacts to the native communities contacted by Cook. It is important to highlight the photographic documentation that he added in his publications which remains a precious historical record.

Despite an impressive study of the collection, not every claim was correct. The most surprising mistake was the attribution to the Cook collection of a wood tray that was later identified as a precious and very old *Taino* object (Fig. 2) belonging to the Medici's collection.

But this incongruence witnesses the huge confusion and lack of knowledge about ethnological artifacts from *La Specola*. Giglioli had used every tool available in his age to become an expert: after journeying himself in faraway extra-European destinations, he built an extensive international web of relations with other institution and museums. He was not satisfied with letters and articles, and kept on travelling to visit personally many of them.

Giglioli's investigation of the Cook collection was not forgotten and the Society reopened the discussion on the search for new documentation that could corroborate his attribution. In 1934 Antonio Mordini published: *Un documento riguardante la collezione proveniente dal terzo viaggio di Cook del Museo Nazionale d'Antropologia ed Etnologia di Firenze*. In this article he reported the contents of the re-discovered commemorative speech *Elogio del Capitano Giacomo Cook*, read by Prof. Michelangiolo Giannetti on 7 June 1785 in the Royal Florentine Academy. This document proved that in 1785 the present collection, or at least a part of it, was already in Florence and that Giglioli conclusions were provided with a solid documental basis.

ADRIANNE KAEPLER IN FLORENCE

In 1865 Giglioli had observed for the first time the collection still in the exhibit at *La Specola* (Giglioli, 1895). A century later, in 1969, Adrienne Kaeppler (1935-2022), an American anthropologist specialized in the study of the cultures of the Pacific islands, began her study on Cook artifacts distributed in various European museums. She ended up spending years researching different European collections thought linked to James Cook.



Fig. 2. One of the illustrations from Giglioli articles describing the Cook collection. The Taino artifact is n. 49.

The problem is not missing objects, but missing documentation: this problem, already confronted by Giglioli in Florence, was the same that Kaeppler observed many decades later in the British Museum:

Many objects eventually found their separate ways to the British Museum, but, because they were not considered very important and they had to compete for curators' time within the Department of Antiquities, of which ethnographic specimens were then a part, little attention was paid to them. [...] The British Museum did not even catalogue the objects that came in as gifts (1979, 167).

It was also a problem that involved conservation of the artefacts and Kaeppler cites Giglioli in regards:

Enrico Giglioli describes the «barbarous treatment» in the Florence Museum of their Cook voyage collection, and similar objects elsewhere have simply been allowed to disintegrate. Surprisingly, however, many Cook voyage pieces have survived virtually intact, in spite of the treatment given them by their owners. Much of the early neglect of Cook voyage objects themselves and their lack of documentation derives from the eighteenth-century emphasis on the importance of «natural curiosities», with only secondary consideration, if any, extended to «artificial curiosities», as ethnographic artefacts were called in the eighteenth century (1979, 168).

This is not the only citation that Kaeppler dedicated to Giglioli. Her work included time in Florence, where she investigated the artefacts illustrated by Giglioli.

In 1978 she published *Cook Voyage Artifacts in Leningrad, Berne and Florence Museums*. The incipit of the introduction to the section *The Cook collection in Florence* highlights that: *The Florence collection of ethnographic objects from Cook's voyages was the first to be systematically described and published (Giglioli 1893 and 1895) (1978, 71).*

The following discussion of the Florence collection was based on the translation of these Giglioli's articles. Kaeppler added notes with new information and in some cases corrections. Her research was conducted using and amplifying the same methodology: the comparative analysis of the numerous collections scattered among different museums and the search for historical documents. Kaeppler, confirming the correct attribution of the Florentine collection, believed that the artifacts probably arrived in different moments, and that not all of them had been collected during the third journey. In particular, she discussed the presence of objects from New Caledonia, visited by Cook only on his second voyage.

Doubts were also raised about the *Heva*, the iconic mourning dress from Tahiti, probably from the second voyage too (Fig. 3).



Fig. 3. Heva in the Museum of Florence (Photo by Saulo Bambi).

Commenting on Giglioli's claim that the *Heva* was part of the objects collected during the third and final voyage of Captain Cook, Kaeppler noted: *This is extremely unlikely [...] No complete mourning dresses are known to have been collected on Cook's third voyage, while ten were collected on the second voyage* (1978, 128, n. 100).

Twenty years later, the Cook collection was the subject of a new study that saw the collaboration between the curators of the Museum and the University of Genoa. A result of this collaboration was a thesis written by Simona Nicla

Racozzi (1999). The research allowed to rediscover artefacts thought lost, in the mineralogical collections of the University of Florence. The thesis summarized the documentation related to the collection accumulated over the years and defined a very articulated method of cataloging artifacts. The collaboration with the scholars of Genoa produced an exhibition panel (Italian and English) illustrating the *Heva*, the famous funerary ritual costume. Traces of this work and collaboration also remain in a series of articles published in the CXXX volume of the Archive (2000).

THE HEVA: A COSTUME FOR MULTIPLE PERSPECTIVES

Only a few *Heva* have survived from the eighteenth century. This iconic mourning garment was described by Giglioli as a ceremonial robe for funerals worn by the priest or by a relative. He explained that *the term heva or heiva still means in Tahitian «feast» or «ceremony» in a generic sense* (1893, 236, n. 1). He considered it *the most unusual and splendid costume, which I had the good fortune to put together with not a little effort, it is without doubt the most important and noteworthy object in the Cook collection now in our museum* (1893, 236). Gilda Della Ragione (2000) illustrated the costume highlighting its symbolism: cosmology, values and connection to nature are expressed through the language of materials and elaborated manufactures.

Another *Heva* is preserved by the The British Museum. After being on public display in the Museum's ethnographic galleries, in the 1960s it was removed and a project of conservation undertaken. An extensive, no-invasive research was performed. For the 250th anniversary of Captain Cook's first voyage, the costume was displayed for the first time in over forty years (Tamburini *et al.*, 2020).

The *Heva* in the exhibit of the National Museum of Ethnology *Minpaku* (Osaka, Japan), offers interesting ideas. It is a *Reconstructed mourning costume* worn by a chief mourner at a high-ranking Tahitian's funeral: it is not a «original» artifacts, but a copy. As already observed by Joy Hendry:

The Minpaku, built relatively late on the site of the Osaka Expo, held in 1970, displays objects from around the world in its permanent galleries, as do other ethnographic museums, but it also has large sections on Japan, and a section on Europe. Unlike most European museums, however, the objects are often commissioned new, or simply copied and it is argued that this policy avoids claims from indigenous peoples that their culture has been misappropriated (2002, 25).

The Guide to *Minpaku* also develops other interpretations. The reader is reminded that clothing is not determined by the natural environment alone, it can also be used to communicate special cultural roles and meanings.

Power manifests itself in clothing and ornaments. The iconic *Heva* can be re-interpreted in this context:

According to the surviving records of Captain Cook, a European explorer of the Pacific, to express the mourners' grief, the person who puts on this costume walks through the village playing mother-of-pearl castanets. Those who hear this sound instantly hide themselves. If they are sighted, they will, with no exception, be struck with a club studded with shark teeth. The blow is understood as a manifestation of the strength of the mourners' grief (Seki, 2018, 166).

The picture of the *Heva* is juxtaposed to another garment:

Consider then, the Soviet military uniforms and medals in the Central and North Asia gallery, which express the power of military force (Seki, 2018, 168).

NARRATIVES OF OMISSIONS AND DISGUISE

The Pitt Rivers Museum houses a large collection of artefacts from Cook's voyages to the Pacific between 1768 and 1775.

The museum developed a project to study forms of representations communicated through paneling and labels. The Cook collection is a central case of study. The *Labeling Matters* project is not limited to the identification of derogatory language use, but also investigates the use of euphemisms, embellishing narrative and omitted contexts and information. The project analyzes the narratives traditionally used in panels to communicate this specific collection to the public.

In Florence, a little framed panel was the general explanation of the collection (probably prepared for the inauguration of the exhibition at Palazzo Nonfinito in 1932). It is an interesting testimony of this trend (Fig. 4).

The little framed panel is titled *L'assassinio del Capitano Giacomo Cook* (The Murder of Captain James Cook) and opens up by informing that James Cook was slaughtered in Hawaii.

It concludes that Captain Cook, following a revolt of the inhabitants of the island was treacherously killed with club blows and his remains dispersed (*...il Comandante Cook, a seguito di una sommossa degli indigeni dell'isola medesima, fu proditoriamente ucciso a colpi di clava, e i suoi resti vennero dispersi*). Clearly no mention of natives killed during Cook's expeditions is made. Nor the impact that the European contact had on the populations. The narrative follows the same colonial and ethnocentric view highlighted in the Pitt-Rivers.

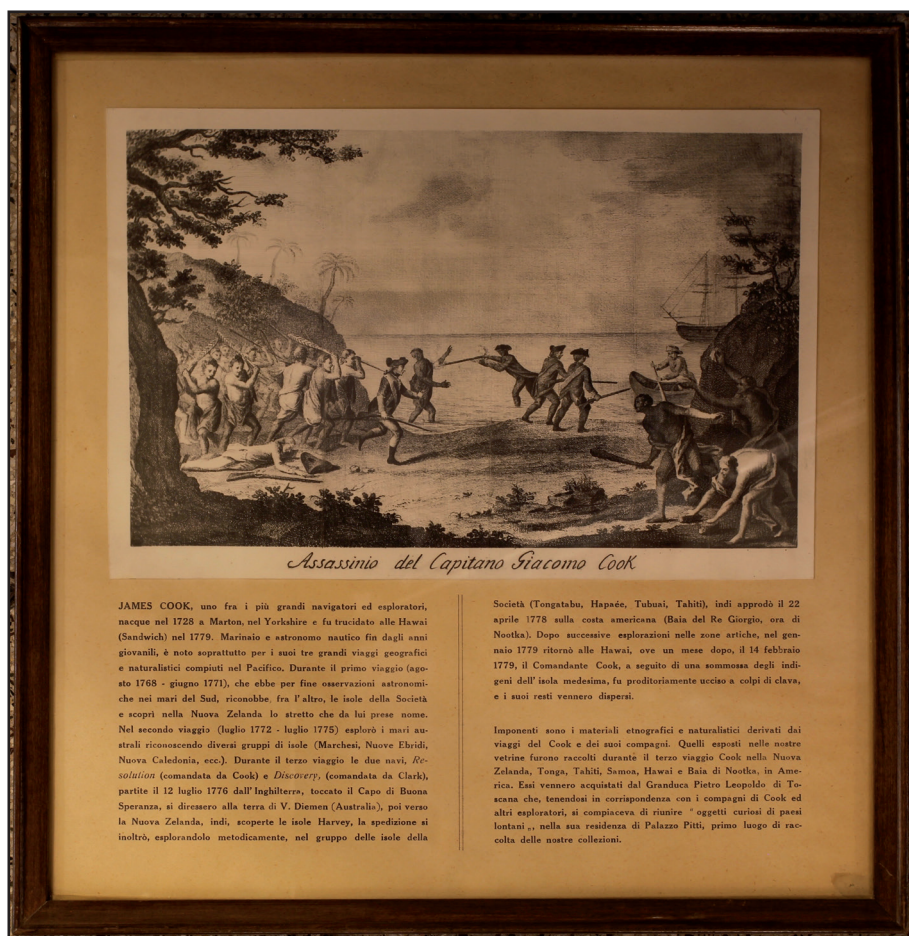


Fig. 4. Framed panel «L'assassinio del Capitano Giacomo Cook».

CONCLUSIONS

The history of objects is created every time that we put them in relation with the context they were conceived, made and used. It is also important to reconnect them with the stories of the people that collected them, included them in a collection, studied them, and finally with the public that observes them in the museum. The process of creative narratives must be continuously renewed and widened, or the objects will lose their voice.

The Cook collection is a useful study case, that connect us with a crucial historical events, a research started by Giglioli. Probably overshadowed by the fame of Paolo Mantegazza, Giglioli contribution to anthropological and ethnological museology needs still to be documented.

The work of Adrienne Kaeppler was also of great importance:

Some have asked why such minute details are important. [...] the importance of collections from Cook's voyages often lies in the fact that his expeditions were the first to make extensive contact with the local inhabitants. The objects traded to the ships are, therefore, relatively free from European influence. But because European tools, technology, and ideas were traded to local inhabitants by the men on the ships, changes could take effect immediately [...]. Thus it is crucial to be able to state with certainty that object collected in Tonga were from the second or third voyage (Kaeppler, 1878, preface viii).

These collection tells many other stories, some are lost in the past and they will probably remain a mystery. New stories should be created renewing the connection with native people where they originated.

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