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The colonial face casts of Nello Puccioni: an emblematic case from Italy's fascist period

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Abstract. This article focuses, for the first time, on an in depth and systematic study of the face casts production of the Florentine anthropologist Nello Puccioni. The face casts are housed at the Museum of Anthropology and Ethnology of the University of Florence. Puccioni took the face casts in the course of his expeditions to Somalia (1924 and 1935) and Libya (1928 and 1929) during the Italian colonial occupation in Africa. This collection represents an emblematic case study of sensitive artefacts created, displayed and disseminated during fascism. This research represents an essential step in the well-needed process of decolonization of the Florentine museum and its contents.

Keywords: decolonization, visual anthropology, museology, three-dimensional representation, African studies.

INTRODUCTION

In recent years, plaster face casts taken from living individuals have received renewed attention. Face casts are a typology of artifacts historically produced by anthropologists, but now considered outdated. They were often forgotten or due to their ambivalent nature, purposely left in deposits. However, scholars have now begun to realize that a systematic study of face casts can illuminate many aspects of the history of anthropology.

«In general, research into the acquisition contexts of collections and objects should be approached by using multiple perspectives, which take into account the divergent (post) colonial experiences of the societies involved, and call into question Eurocentric perspectives on colonial history and colonialism» (Grimme, 2020, 60).

Here we present a case study of face casts housed at the Museum of Anthropology and Ethnology of the University of Florence. The museum was founded in 1869 as Italy's National Museum, when Florence served as the capital of the newly born Italian State. The museum's founder, Paolo Mantegazza, held Italy's first chair of Anthropology and also founded the *Società Italiana per l'Antropologia e l'Etnologia* and its journal *Archivio per l'Antropologia e la Etnologia*. The substantial unity of these three institutions represents a unique situation to study history of Anthropology in Italy, from its beginning through the parable of fascism up till today. These entities (Museum, Society and its journal) cover the entire arch of Italian anthropological history. However, the objects now housed in the museum go even back much further in time to the Medici and represent a stratification of contents and contexts resulting from almost five centuries of collecting.

The Museum emerged from the outset in an original form, reflecting Paolo Mantegazza's critical view of the craniometric approach of Broca's French school (Barsanti and Landi, 2014). Mantegazza emphasized the entirety of human existence, encompassing physiological, evolutionary, biological, cultural, and historical aspects. In this framework, photographs (at the time invented just a few decades earlier) and particularly face casts derived from living subjects assumed pivotal roles, serving as indispensable aids for a profound and multifaceted exploration of human diversity. This comprehensive methodology defined what later became known as the «Florentine anthropological school» (Chiozzi, 1993; Barsanti and Landi, 2014). Mantegazza's innovative approach was always intended to keep biological and cultural aspects together, anticipating some of the themes that would later be developed in modern cultural anthropology.

The face casts were originally intended to record and catalogue somatic characteristics in 3D of the various populations of the world. They documented individual traits linked to sex and age as well as cultural characteristics such as tattoos and scars. Face casts were, in Mantegazza's vision, a fundamental tool for the study of human diversity. Today, however, they are considered ambivalent, problematic and sensitive, because they were most often taken directly from living persons with or without consent, typically in colonial context, in circumstances emblematic of power disparity (Sysling, 2015; Isaac and Colebank, 2022).

The literature about face casts produced by Italian anthropologists has generally focused on those made by Lidio Cipriani, an influential and controversial anthropologist that worked at the University and Museum of Florence. These publications have rightly highlighted how Cipriani's face casts were dramatically compromised with colonialism, fascism and racist ideology (Scaggion and Carrara, 2015; Dionisio *et al.*, 2020; Piccioni, 2022; Isaac and Colebank, 2022; Nicolosi *et al.*, 2024).

However, the Cipriani facial cast collection is only one of several housed in the Florentine museum. A survey by Dionisio *et al.* (2020) provided a general assessment of the different collections preserved in Florence. It showed that the history of face casts is much older than that of Cipriani. Indeed, the facial casts of Cipriani were temporally the last of long series of collections that were taken following a wide range of different scientific approaches and purposes.

The first face casts to arrive at the Florence Museum were produced by Otto Finsch. Notably, Elio Modigliani, a disciple of Mantegazza, was the first Florentine anthropologist to make face casts during his explorations among native populations in Indonesia, in particular during his last three expeditions, to Sumatra, Engano and Mentawai Islands (1891, 1894). Over time the Florentine institution increasingly became a center for the reproduction of copies, which were then marketed at the request of other Italian and European institutions.

In order to understand better the history of Anthropology of face casts, it is essential to conduct a systematic study of all the various collections from different historical periods. As a contribution to this goal we focused here on the collection of casts produced by Nello Puccioni (the predecessor of Cipriani as the Director of the Museum) during four scientific missions in Italian colonies: Somalia (1924 and 1935) and Libya (1928 and 1929). Puccioni (1881-1937) is a key figure to understand the era of fascism before 1938, year of the racial laws. He was an influential anthropologist, professor, collector, disseminator, and intensely involved in anthropological studies in the Italian colonies. Puccioni had a brilliant academic career and he undoubtedly had an impact on successive generations of students, on the museum and on the society, about topics that directly touched anthropological and colonial issues. He was a professor at the University of Pavia from 1925 and moved in 1929 to «Cesare Alfieri» Higher Institute of Political and Social Sciences in Florence, where he taught Geography and Ethnology of Colonies. In 1931 he succeeded Aldobrandino Mochi as Professor of Anthropology at the University of Florence and Director of the Anthropology Museum.

Puccioni's collaboration with the Museum of Florence, however, goes back many years. In 1909 he wrote about the collection, at the time, housed in the original location in Via Capponi: *«The museum has a collection of 163 colorful face casts displayed in a separate room. They are mainly from individuals from New Guinea, New Britain and Micronesia and come from the Finsch collection. 43 other masks were produced by Doctor Modigliani during his travels among the Toba, in the Mentawei islands and Engano»* (translated from Puccioni, 1909, 272). Starting from the 1920s, the museum was transferred to the halls of the prestigious Florentine Palazzo Nonfinito in via del Proconsolo. The Palazzo Nonfinito venue allowed a more clearly articulated political interpretation congruent with the territorial political expansion and the racial theories of fascism. Fascism, whose dictatorial regime was established in Italy by Mussolini starting in 1922, increasingly influenced the museum project and the Florentine anthropological disciplines.

Nello Puccioni from 1924 until 1935 continued the Florentine tradition of producing face casts taken from living humans and depositing them in the museum. The making of face casts was exponentially increased by Lidio Cipriani. Cipriani made his first face casts in 1927 and the last face casts for the museum during an expedition to the African colonies in 1938-39. Therefore, Puccioni's and Cipriani's face cast activities overlapped chronologically for some 9 years. Both Puccioni's and Cipriani's face casts from both anthropologists (Dionisio *et al.*, 2020).

The research missions conducted by both Nello Puccioni and Lidio Cipriani in Africa, though they represent different approaches and ideological frameworks, became part of a broad consensus on the colonial policies of the Mussolini regime. Africa became the preferred field of study by Italian anthropologists supporting colonial, racial policies and finally openly racist pseudoscientific claims. However, both the figure of Nello Puccioni and face casts he made remained in the shadows. Puccioni was cited in scant references by historians, and then, only as a figure of «secondary scientific level» (Labanca, 1992).

The scope of this article is not to establish the scientific level of Puccioni's production, even if it could be argued that it is underestimated (see discussion). The goal of this paper is to survey the collection of face casts produced by Puccioni. There are only few publications, which deal with Puccioni's face casts. Some information on the Libya face casts were disseminated in recent years (Falcucci and Barbagli, 2017; Falcucci and Barbagli, 2019).

In a general overview of the Florentine face casts, Dionisio *et al.* (2020) gave the correct assessment of 41 Puccioni's face casts and their connection to specific missions to Somalia and to Libya. Unfortunately, perhaps because all this literature was published in Italian, this information has been widely ignored. For example Piccioni (2022, 379) erroneously states, *«Puccioni assembled a collection of 40 casts in Somalia*». Instead, the exact number of casts from Somalia is 11, and 30 from Libya (see below). To rectify misunderstandings such as that of Piccioni (2022) our study aimed to systematically study Puccioni's entire face cast production.

Results

The Puccioni's collection of face casts in the Museum of Anthropology and Ethnology of Florence

Puccioni's face casts were produced exclusively during his four expeditions to Africa. Puccioni produced a total of 43 face casts as follows: 5 from 1924 expedition to Somalia, 19 from the 1928 expedition to Cirenaica and Sudan, 11 from the 1929 expedition to Cirenaica and Sudan, and 8 from the expedition to Somalia in 1935. One face cast from each mission to Somalia, as recorded in the inventories, went missing (5305 and 6104). Therefore, there are 41 face casts currently in the museum. Most of the face casts are kept in the deposits.

Regarding Somalia, of the four face casts remaining from the 1924 expedition, two were taken at the Mogadisciu hospital, (1 female and one male, 5306 and 5308) and two at the Hordio clinic (one male and one female, 5309 and 5310). In 1935, Puccioni took face casts from two women in Dinsor (6102 and 6103) and six men (6104-6109) in Dinsor, Bardera, Chisimaio and Mergherita (Mombasa Island). The lost cast came from this last male group (n.cat.6104), leaving today 4 female face casts (Fig. 1) and 7 male face casts from the two missions in Somalia (Fig. 2). From Puccioni's notes, we understand that he was trying to study individuals from different ethnic groups and that inside these ethnic groups, he was trying to report also the *«cabila»* or tribe these individuals belonged to: Sciaveli, *Cabila* Bed Bedan; Dighil, *Cabila* Giddu; Scidle, *Cabila* Gher Magal; etc.



Fig. 1. Women's face casts from Somalia left to right: 5306 and 5310 (1924 expedition); 6102, 6103 (1935 expedition).



Fig. 2. Men's face casts from Somalia, left to right: 5308 and 5309 (1924 expedition); 6105, 6106, 6107, 6109 (1935 expedition).

Puccioni produced a total of 30 face casts from Libya during the expeditions of 1928 (5509-5527= 19) and 1929 (5570-5780= 11). In total they represent 11 women (Fig. 3) and 19 males (Fig. 4). Among women, Puccioni portrayed 10 «Berbers», detailing their elaborate tattoos.

We note here that many ethnonyms used in colonial times (and by Puccioni) are today completely abandoned or critically discussed, because they are recognized as misleading, derogatory or ultimately «trigger» words. The term Berber (same root of Barbarian) is currently under scrutiny and people that were labeled under this term recognize themselves as Imazighen (sing.: Amazigh), meaning free-people (Almasude, 1999).



Fig. 3. Women's face cast from Libya (1928-29 expeditions). From left to right and top to bottom, first row: 5510, 5515, 5517, 5518; second row: 5523, 5524, 5527, 5574; third row: 5575, 5578, 5579.



Fig. 4. Men's face casts from Libya (1928-29 expeditions). From left to right, from top to bottom, first row: 5509, 5511, 5512, 5513; second row: 5514, 5516, 5519, 5520; third row: 5521, 5526, 5525, 5526; fourth row: 5570, 5571, 5572, 5573; fifth row: 5576, 5577, 5580.

DISCUSSION

The production of face casts was a complex procedure of the anthropological research methods and was closely connected to anthropometric measurements, which were meticulously collected in highly detailed files. Data were accompanied by photographic documentation, conducted according to pre-established standards and rules. Unfortunately, of the four expeditions conducted by Puccioni, only cards from the first mission can be found in the museum. However, this is highly informative material to understand the research methods used and to link the face casts to more detailed information than those reported in the catalogues. Cards are accompanied by a handwritten numbered list by Puccioni, with information on the individuals and notes about photographs and eventually face casts made.

Disparity of power and gender

From his diaries of 1928 and 1929, from which it is possible to obtain much information on the timing of the production of facial models and the difficulties in carrying them out: «24 January 1928. I continue with greater intensity the measures at the clinic and at the hospital [...]. The first face cast I tried to make broke in two, much to my regret: the plaster is very slow to dry and I fear it will get me into serious trouble» (translated from Falcucci and Barbagli, 2019, 70-71). The diaries also testify a «soft» approach with the subjects who were subjected to the practice, very similar to what emerges from Modigliani's writings. On 21 March 1929 Puccioni wrote: «...I need to get used to it again: of the four masks I did, the first broke in such a way to result useless, and I did not feel to put back under [the procedure] that unfortunate man who had been even too still» (translated from Falcucci and Barbagli, 2019, 160). But the disparity of power was certainly more accentuated: Modigliani acted in the Dutch colonies and often without the support of the occupiers, indeed often escaping their rules, while Puccioni was supported by the colonial authorities themselves and was directly part of the occupiers. The problem of disparity of power is even more critical when investigated in the «study» of the female body. Puccioni used as human material for his studies, individuals provided by colonial institutions where «derelict» subjects often converged. The women studied are often described in his anthropometric records as «prostitutes». Their status allowed them to be photographed in complete nudity and have casts made in additions to faces, even of their genitals.

In particular, one described as a «prostitute» was given particular attention. She was the first woman studied by Puccioni with a face cast (5306) during his first mission in Somalia, on the 14th, February 1924 at Mogadishu Hospital. A series of data describing her body are reported in the anthropometric card no 33. Puccioni also made a cast of her genitals (5307). This cast is considered particularly sensitive and disturbing today.

It was certainly rationalized on the basis that the context of anthropological tradition, as shown by the story of Sarah Baartman. This woman was brought from Africa to Europe as an attraction; her promoters presented her as the «Hottentot Venus» (the term «hottentot», today marked as derogatory, was used for a long time to name Khoisan people). When she died at only 25, in 1815, the famous naturalist Georges Cuvier made a plaster cast of her body, then he dissected it. He preserved her skeleton, but also, in jars, her brain and genitals. These parts of her body were on public display at the Musée de l'Homme, Paris, until 1974 (Christillin and Greco, 2021). Cuvier wanted to document and preserve the anatomical features of the genitals he wrongly thought was a racial characteristic. Puccioni instead was interested in the cultural practice of female genital modification.

Puccioni had a longstanding interest in bodily modifications and mutilations in different cultures (the subject of his graduation thesis). He had also dedicated a scientific presentation to the same subject during one of the sessions of the Florentine Society and a publication in the *Archivio* that included also female mutilation and infibulation practices (Puccioni, 1905).

We note here the important documentation provided by 10 face casts of tattoos in Imazighen women from Libya: *«The practice is uniquely feminine as an Amazigh girl would receive her first tattoo, on her face for all to see, as a sign that she had reached the onset of menses, a rite of passage that takes various forms of celebration across the globe. This blue line, with various adornments depending on tribal affiliation, marks her entry as a full participant in her community, a woman ready to impart knowledge and tradition to the future generation she will help bear» (Mesuani, 2019, 13-14). It is a subject very relevant for the living women from these communities widely diffused in North- Africa: <i>«Amazigh women, like nature itself, are seen as powerful, and the tattooing ceremonies around each symbol serve to guide the woman's energy to the goal and message of each sign.* [...]. Her first tattoo, the vertical line on her chin, points toward this symbol, grounding her in peace and cementing her role within the community as a source of peace and calm for her sisters and the traditions she shares» (Mesuani, 2019, 38).

The role of Nello Puccioni

Puccioni has been little discussed and studied even by anthropologists themselves, crushed between the eclectic and cumbersome figure of Paolo Mantegazza and the controversial Lidio Cipriani, who succeeded Puccioni as director of the Museum Florentine in 1937. The same omission occurs in attempts to study the changes linked to fascism in the history of Florentine institutions founded by Mantegazza: Taylor (1988) recognized a decisive turning point in the racist drift between 1937 and 1938, but he did not mention Nello Puccioni who, until his sudden death in 1937, had a central role not only in the museum, but also in the academic environment, in the Anthropology Society and in its journal.

Nello Puccioni's background combined humanistic knowledge and scientific study. He was considered as an intellectual with refined interests in art, theater and literature. At the beginning on 1900 he was among the founders of the literary journal *Hermes*. He was acquainted with Gabriele D'Annunzio and in close contact with the intellectuals who animated the Florentine culture of the early twentieth century such as Giuseppe Prezzolini, Giovanni Papini, and artists as Adolfo de Carolis. As a young man, he abandoned the faculty of medicine to study Natural Sciences, and in this field he specialized in Anthropology.

The publication of Puccioni's diaries, written during his expeditions to Libya, contributed to outline the personality and the role of this anthropologist (Falcucci and Barbagli, 2017; Falcucci and Barbagli, 2019). Also significant are letters written to Puccioni by the famous explorer and scholar (of Jewish origins) Elio Modigliani, over the course of three decades (Barbagli and Bigoni, 2023). Even if Puccioni's answers are missing, they give a good idea of the friendship, collaboration and profound cultural and scientific dialogue between the two. They also demonstrate Puccioni's resolve to participate as soon as possible in field research in the colonial territories, and Modigliani's attempts to support him through his many relationships with influential figures of the time. The relationship with the older and famous Modigliani certainly represented a source of both learning and inspiration for the young anthropologist. Puccioni himself wrote that he had created both the photographic images and the facial masks following the procedure and criteria learned from Modigliani, who was responsible for introducing the technique for the execution of plaster casts on living in the Florentine school (Puccioni, 1932).

As an aside to the discussion of Puccioni's acuity as a scientist, it is worth noting that he raised serious doubts on the authenticity of Piltdown finding. This most famous paleontological hoax was a trap into which the most eminent palaeontologists of the time fell. Puccioni motivated his rejection of Piltdown on the basis of his detailed knowledge of the anatomy of primates (Puccioni, 1912).

Between Puccioni's first mission in Somalia in 1924 and the last in 1935, there were many events and changes in Italian society, anthropology and colonial policies. In 1933, the fascist regime approved new laws for Somalia and Eritrea, which restricted drastically the granting of Italian citizenship to indigenous

people. While previously the children of Italians and indigenous women were accepted in the civil status registers even when the father remained unknown, the new law made the granting of citizenship for children of unknown white parents, subject to the so-called «race test». Article 17 established, in fact, that citizenship could only be attributed after having «well-founded reasons» to believe that both parents were white. The law pretended to establish ancestry on the basis of anthropological criteria, the morphological study of the skull, including description of the shape and volume characteristics, and various anthropometric measurements. All was conducted on the basis of the «most recent studies of ethnographic anthropology». Only after having successfully completed this anthropological examination other social and cultural factors could be examined. This process was presented as a guarantee of the preservation of the «dominant race». It is easy to underline here that the meticulous and tedious routine of acquiring measurements and anthropometric data on skin color, hair type, etc., became a discriminating tool for deciding the fate of the people observed. These norms became stricter since 1936. The III Congress of Colonial Studies (Florence and Rome between 12 and 17 April 1937) provided a timely scientific justification for a new «decreto legislativo», providing sanctions against mixed couple relationships (Sanzioni per i rapporti d'indole coniugale tra cittadini e sudditi). Indeed, the third Congress represented the ideal forum to justify racial separation from an anthropological and ethnological point of view (Dore, 1981). Puccioni was one of the main organizers of this series of initiatives. In particular, he held the role of general secretary at all three Italian colonial congresses, which took place between 1931 and 1937. For his involvement in colonial studies and initiatives, he obtained in 1934, the «commenda dell'Ordine coloniale della Stella d'Italia» and in 1937 the appointment as ordinary and permanent member of the Fascist Colonial Institute (Surdich, 2016). Puccioni died unexpectedly in Florence shortly after these last events, on the 31th of May 1937.

Conclusions

It can be noted that the Italian colonies of Somalia and Libya presented very different situations, as highlighted in reports by the Roman Institute of Statistics (1933). Further, Puccioni's various missions were organized and supported by different institutions with diverse motivations and goals. These factors influenced methods, collecting and results.

The first missions in Somalia (1923-1924) was sponsored by the Italian Geographical Society and produced 5 face casts, one was later lost. The second mission in Somalia (1935) was sponsored by The Italian Academy and produced 8 face casts. Puccioni's wide collection of Somalian ethnological

artifacts was the focus of the missions and is still preserved in the museum.

In contrast the Libya missions were directly promoted by the Governorate of Cyrenaica (Puccioni, 1933; 1934), and were mainly oriented towards anthropometric studies, as confirmed by Puccioni's report to the deputy governor of Cyrenaica: *«The research carried out in the two parts of the Mission was based on over 980 individuals and is documented by an important series of 80 photographs (face and profile) and 30 plaster masks by me performed on the living»* (Falcucci and Barbagli, 2019, 227). According to the museum inventories, these masks were «donated by the Governorate of Cyrenaica» itself. Puccioni did not bring back ethnological collections and even conceived the idea that an ethnographic museum should be organized on the site.

In 1937, after the sudden death of Puccioni, Lidio Cipriani was appointed Director of the Museum of Anthropology and Ethnology. In 1938, the racial laws were published which, among other things, banned Jews from schools, workplaces and universities. Lidio Cipriani was reported among the subscribers in support of the initiative. In the same year, Leonori-Cecina wrote on the infamous journal *La difesa della razza (The defense of the race)*, in an article dedicated to the Florentine museum: *«The Libya section is poor. In this fervor of racial studies, it is necessary to fill this gap, thus satisfying not only a desire of scholars, but a need for colonial and anthropological knowledge, especially since the Museum and the Institute of Anthropology of Florence undoubtedly constitute the oldest and most active center when it comes to racism» (translated from Leonori-Cecina, 1938, 23).*

On 16 September of the same year, Il Popolo d'Italia, the newspaper founded in 1914 by Mussolini himself, at the time when he was a member the socialist party, dedicated a detailed and long article to the «oldest racist center» in which the collection of «facial models» was exalted: «Not everyone knows of the existence of a great Institute where the problems of racism have been studied here for around seventy years. We mean the Institute of Anthropology of the Royal University of Florence, founded in 1869 by Paolo Mantegazza. But it would not be possible to talk about this Institute without mentioning the «Italian Society of Anthropology and Ethnology» and the «National Museum of Anthropology», because they are part of the same organism [...] it is also appropriate to know that the Museum is characterized by a splendid collection entrusted with the task and prerogative of illustrating the human races in their most relevant or conspicuous somatic differences, especially those of the face. And a series of facial models is here to complete, in a quick glance, the very lively racist interest of a visit. In relation to these materials, taken from the study and examination of the activities of the races and therefore expression of the degree of civilization reached by them, a visit to this Museum can very appropriately, and effectively reiterate the concepts of racism, in the belief that our race, as the highest creator of civilization, must maintain its line of unmistakable

characteristics conquered through the labor and splendor of millennia» (translated from Domenichelli, 1938).

In 1940 Lidio Cipriani was removed from the Museum and from the academic role of Professor, as he was accused of having sold for his own benefit copies of face casts that were the product of ministerial research missions (Landi and Moggi Cecchi, 2014). The suspension from all academic positions did not prevent him from continuing to publish racist propaganda articles on *La difesa della razza*, but with his exit from the museum, the serial accumulation of new face casts ended.

The collection of face casts proves to be a precious material for reconstructing the parable of the Florentine anthropological school. They can lead us to a broader and profound vision of the past, but it also opens up new future perspectives in the use of these artifacts. The plaster face casts naturally lend themselves to being placed at the center of projects that examine the relationships between different cultures and to processes of enhancement and preparation of an interdisciplinary nature. However, such projects cannot arise from improvisation. It is necessary, before elaborating new proposals, to have a clear and multidimensional pictures of the meaning attributed to these objects when they were produced and of what they can communicate to our community in terms of current scientific knowledge, but especially to shed light on the Eurocentric and colonial prevarication they were conceived.

During the fascist period these artefacts were used with the declared intention of justifying the division of humanity into distinct races. Thus, they provide direct historical evidence of how anthropological studies were conducted during the period of the so-called «racial anthropology». Today, these uses and intentions have been replaced by different considerations, radically opposed to those of the past. Using these new keys of interpretation, face casts can be considered as «sensitive material» representing fragments of humanity. Above all, thanks to the biographical data recorded at the time of their production, they make it possible to give a face to the identities of people, populations and cultural traditions. They emotionally link us to a past on which we have much to reflect and evaluate. In this article we decided to avoid to give personal names of persons portrayed out of respect, especially regarding the women involved. We think that the process to connect face casts to their individual identities would be appropriate only in the context of a collaborative project with descendants or representatives of the same populations.

Regarding the figure and role of Nello Puccioni in the fascist period up to 1937, we consider this article a preliminary study. There is more unpublished material available, which will have to be explored in depth. It includes diaries

from Puccioni's missions in Somalia, as well as programs and notes for his university courses. This study will allow a critical study of his complete journey during the missions in the colonies, and of his role as a teacher and disseminator of information about the colonies in the academic context. Research about influential figures during fascism, and of the artefacts collected in that critical period is an essential step in the well-needed process of decolonization of the Florentine museum and its contents.

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