

The Temple Machine. A New Communication Model for the Villa Giulia National Etruscan Museum

Valentino Nizzo

Villa Giulia National Etruscan Museum, Valentino.nizzo@beniculturali.it

Abstract

The reorganization of the Italian Cultural Heritage Ministry in the last three years has completely revolutionized the system of management and communication of national cultural heritage.

Among the most significant aspects of this revolution, undoubtedly, is the introduction of concepts, such as enjoyment, into the official language of the museum's mission. The concept of enjoyment, in fact, derives from the definition of the Museum elaborated by ICOM in 2007, but which goes back to 1961. The current shift in emphasis, however, introduces the possibility that a museum visit need not be for the purpose of study or research. The challenge for a new generation of museums, therefore, becomes that of educating and at the same time amusing, finding new ways of communicating through storytelling and emotional engagement. With these aims, the reform has included the Villa Giulia Museum among the first thirty museums in Italy to have special, scientific, managerial and administrative autonomy, which represents an important opportunity and challenge for the only museum with these characteristics entirely dedicated to the cultures of pre-Roman Central Italy.

KEYWORDS: ETRUSCOLOGY, VILLA GIULIA, FARO CONVENTION, CULTURAL PARTECIPATION

Introduction

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Fig. 1. Villa Giulia: view of the central courtyard towards the nymphaeum (©MiBAC, Villa Giulia National Etruscan Museum. Ph. M. Benedetti).

Villa Giulia: an Etruscan museum between enjoyment and participation

The Villa Giulia Museum of Rome is so far the only museum in Italy to have included as part of its mission one of the objectives of the Council of Europe Framework Convention on the Value of Cultural Heritage for Society (Faro, 27.X.2005).

Among the most significant aspects of this document are its revolutionary definitions and concepts, when it states, “Cultural heritage is a group of resources inherited from the past that people identify, independent of ownership, as a reflection and expression of their constantly evolving values, beliefs, knowledge and traditions. It includes all aspects of the environment from the interaction between people and places through time.” It further states, “A heritage community

is comprised of people who value specific aspects of cultural heritage that they wish, within the framework of public action, to sustain and transmit to future generations.”

In fact, principles such as those mentioned above finally give People a strategic and active role in the perception, management and enhancement of cultural heritage, understood not only as a set of things but as an integrated system of material and immaterial values, in a dialectical relationship with the environment and also, for this reason, in constant transformation .

Building on these assumptions, I have tried, since the beginning of my mandate (May 2, 2017) to become an interpreter of these values, and to give centrality to people and build a “heritage community” around a museum that is unanimously considered to best represent Etruscan civilization in the world (Fig. 2).



Fig. 2: Villa Giulia: The re-enactment of the sarcophagus of the spouses in presence for the disability day of December 3, 2017 (ph. AGCult).

This has not been an easy path, even if we have been encouraged by the administrative, scientific and management autonomy conferred on the Museum by the reforms that have affected the Ministry for cultural heritage and activities in the last years. The introduction, starting from July 2017, of a membership subscription has been one of the first acts to be carried out in this direction. It is an effective instrument for inducing citizens to return to the Museum and for building a community around it, while at the same time strengthening the role of the institution as vital, inclusive and able to promote the development of culture.

But it was necessary to go further and put in place initiatives capable of recovering and reinforcing the direct link between the Museum and its territory, which the reforms had begun to weaken, due to a sometimes restrictive interpretation of the division of authority between protection (which remains the duty of the Superintendence) and outreach and development (the so-called “valorization”, which rests with the autonomous museums and regional museum poles).

So it was that during the summer of 2017, the ambitious cycle of “Stories of People and Museums” was born, with an invitation to all the historical and archaeological entities that have identified the Museum of Villa Giulia as their natural reference point, starting from its foundation in 1889. This

contributed to the increase of its collections well beyond the cultural boundaries of the Etruscan civilization, as we will see in more detail on the following pages.

This adhesion of the museums has exceeded expectations, and has given life to a cycle that has seen – almost uninterruptedly, from November 2017 to May 2018 – the alternating presentations in our Fortuna Hall, of 42 institutions, often represented not only by their scientific directors and conservators but also by the political or administrative officers (mayors or assessors) of the particular municipalities (Fig. 3).



Fig. 3. Villa Giulia: the presentation of the cycle “Stories of People and Museums”; from the left facing right: A. Campitelli, V. Nizzo, T. Maffei, A. Pinna (©MUSE, Villa Giulia National Etruscan Museum. Ph.).

Among the aspects that have contributed to the success of the initiative, there is the will to give voice to the museums, not only from the perspective of their historical assets and/or as places of culture, but also from that of managers and administrators as well as users.

In the same direction traced a few years ago by Fiona Claire Reynolds, historical general manager - from 2001 to 2012 - of the National Trust for Places of Historic Interest or Natural Beauty:

“The big difference was learning to love people as well as places: making the trust more family-friendly, more open and engaging, as opposed to being stuffy and formal, ‘don’t walk on the grass’ and ‘don’t sit here’, which was the stereotype – and true. I loved it, absolutely loved it, though it was the hardest thing I’ve ever done.”

Our innovation is in accordance with the spirit expressed by Nobel Prize winner Orhan Pamuk in his now famous “Decalogue of a museum that tells daily stories,” introduced by the writer at the conference of International Council of Museums (ICOM) held in Milan in 2016. A museum is intended as a home and a place designed to give voice and expression to individuals, people and everyday stories. This was, therefore, the leitmotiv of the whole project, which thus has obtained,

since its inception, the patronage of the Italian section of the ICOM, and was among the first events included in the programming of the European Year of Cultural Heritage (2018).

The list of the 42 museums involved is perhaps the most significant testimony to the success of an initiative with a deep symbolic value, whose steps can be fully retraced thanks to the videos of the conferences uploaded on the Museum's Youtube channel (@Etruschannel). A forthcoming volume, thanks to the support of the Dià Cultura Foundation, will contribute further to spreading

all the everyday stories that will find hospitality in the Villa Giulia.

A 130 year long (at least) history

The Villa Giulia National Etruscan Museum was established in 1889 through the efforts of Italian archaeologist and politician, Felice Barnabei, and based on a systematic program of archaeological exploration and a carefully conceived museographic plan. This plan was designed to provide the city of Rome with a “national museum that would be one of the principle centers of historic and artistic culture,” structured with a section for “urban antiquity” (today part of the Museo Nazionale Romano, “National Roman Museum”) and one for “extra-urban antiquity,” where all the artifacts discovered in the area of the Capital and lands once belonging to the Church, from Lazio to Umbria, were to be displayed. From the start, the latter material was housed in the villa built between 1550 and 1555 by Pope Julius III Ciochi del Monte on his holdings near the Via Flaminia. The villa itself was the product of a collaboration between the great artists of the day: Jacopo Barozzi da Vignola, Bartolomeo Ammannati, Giorgio Vasari, Michelangelo Buonarroti, Taddeo Zuccari, Prospero Fontana, Pietro Venale da Imola. A residence built to indulge the caprice and aspirations of the Pontif, an admirer of antiquities and architect of an urban architectural program through which he sought to liken himself to the great Roman emperors, as is made clear by his choice of name (Julius, taken from the Julio-Claudian dynasty). The Pope further sought to make this connection with Imperial Rome through the installation of a scenographic nymphaeum in the villa, which drew water from the Aqua Virgo (an aqueduct built by Augustus), as well as the pictorial decoration of the villa's hemicircular portico, which was inspired by the “grotesque” imagery of the Domus Aurea, and frescoed rooms of the first and second floors, among which stands out the extraordinary cycle of frescoes with representations of the Seven Hills of Rome, an eighth hills coinciding with the site of the Villa Giulia itself.

The project of Barnabei thus thought to reclaim one of the most fascinating places of the Italian Renaissance, which over time had fallen into decline, reconfigured at various points as a military hospital, veterinary school, and even carriage house. At the same time, Barnabei wanted to give his fledgling nation a museum entirely dedicated to the most ancient origins of Italian identity, which was possible through an exhibition focusing on the pre-Roman antiquities of peoples such as the Etruscans and their Italic neighbors (especially the Faliscans, Umbrians, Latins, and Sabines).

The first nucleus of the museum was constituted by materials coming from the territory of the Faliscans (from Falerii, modern-day Civita Castellana; Corchiano; Narce; etc.). Their territory, which laid between the Cimini Mountains and Tibur River, was the object of systematic topographic surveys and excavations in the preceding years. In addition to Faliscan antiquities, numerous objects were soon added to the museum's holdings from the habitation sites, sanctuaries, and necropoleis of Lazio south of the Tibur (including Gabii, Nemi, Alatri, Ardea, Tivoli, Lanuvio, Segni, Satricum, Palestrina), Umbria (including Terni, Nocera Umbra, Gualdo Tadino, Todi), and above all Etruria (Cerveteri, Veio, Bisenzio e Vulci), due in part to the creation in 1939 of the Superintendency of Antiquities for Southern Etruria with headquarters at the Villa Giulia Museum and jurisdiction over the southern part of the ancient Etruscan territory.

Such circumstances led to the dramatic augmentation of the collection's Etruscan character over the course of the twentieth century with the result that today the museum is without a doubt the most significant repository of Etruscan material culture. The first expansion of the building itself took place between 1912 and 1923 with the creation of two new symmetrical wings which flanked the original Renaissance structure. Later extensions were owed to the acquisition of important historic collections, such as the section of Etruscan and Italic materials from the Kircherian museum in the Collegio Romano, the exceptionally rich collection of antiquities and objects in gold assembled by multiple generations of the Castellani family, and the celebrated princely tomb assemblages of the Bernardini and Barberini tombs.

Between 1950 and 1970, the gradual increase in acquisitions made continual amplifications of the exposition spaces necessary. These were carried out under the leadership of superintendents Renato Bartoccini and Mario Moretti and based on the plans of architect Franco Minissi, who is principally responsible for the existing layout of the museum. At the same time and for the same reasons, through the initiative of Moretti and his successors, various local museums were established throughout the territory of Southern Etruria, which was previously unequipped with such entities (an exception is Tarquinia, which had exhibited its own collection since the second half of the nineteenth century and thus is the only large Etruscan city not to be fully represented in the Villa Giulia). These local museums were established through the direct transferal of materials from the collections and storerooms of the Villa Giulia Museum, which was consequently "lightened" and reorganized, while maintaining a dialectic relationship and numerous contextual connections with that which was transferred to the new museums. As a result, in the span of a few years, the state museums of Cerveteri, Civitavecchia, Pyrgi, Tuscania, Viterbo, and Vulci, among others, were founded, as well as numerous other municipal museums, such as at Trevignano Romano, Farnese, Nepi, and Bolsena, which arose thanks to the advancement on conservation activities and research conducted in the territory.

The final acquisition of the museum was that Villa Poniatowski, which became state property in 1989 and today is the object of a complex restructuration and restoration project. Built as a dependance of Pope Julius III's villa, Villa Poniatowski owes its name to the grandson of the final king of Poland, Stanislaw Poniatowski, who, having moved to Rome towards the end of the eighteenth century, chose this sixteenth-century building as his residence. Renovations of the villa were entrusted to Giuseppe Valadier, celebrated Neoclassical architect who took inspiration from the ancient world in redecorating some of the main rooms, such as the Egyptian and Indian rooms. With time the villa passed into other hands, including those of the Riganti family that built a tannery in the ancient "garden of delights," thereby leading the area into a state of progressive decline with the subsequent imposition of houses, workshops, and artists' studios on the premises.

The restoration of the main core of the villa in the new millennium has allowed us to modify the original organization of the collections. Thus, the bulk of Etruscan, Faliscan, and part of the historic collections are now housed at the Villa Giulia, while the antiquities from Umbria and Latium Vetus are in Villa Poniatowski.

The design of the reinstallation, despite the fact that it was completed in relatively recent times, reflects a vision which is not always easily comprehended by the non-specialist visitor, especially the foreign visitor. It is a situation rendered all the more difficult by the reform of the education system that in 2003 brought about a significant modification of school curricula, reducing notably time devoted to the Etruscans and to the other pre-Roman civilizations of Italy.

The current layout of the galleries adheres to a rigorous topographic, chronological structure but does not provide an introductory section offering a general framing of Etruscan and Italic history, art, and daily life, which is essential for comprehending the importance of the collection and for resolving the numerous questions and presumed "mysteries" (such as, for example, questions

regarding Etruscan origins and language) that commonly form part of our collective imagination of Etruscan civilization.

The “Temple Machine”

We must therefore go beyond this layout. We must restore the narrative dimension of the museum so as to reduce the distance between the museum and the general public, renewing the centrality and importance that such historic realities have for the comprehension and strength of Italian identity. This must be done without overlooking, however, the historic, architectural, and artistic dimensions of the two villas that make up the museum, dimensions which are almost completely ignored in the museum’s current configuration, to the point that they seem like simple venues lacking identity and any sort of connection to the collections that they house .

With such objectives in mind, the Temple Machine project was born as part of a broader and more structured program of reinstallation to provide new spaces for enjoyment and to enhance the narrative component of the museum through the intelligent, measured application of new technologies.

The point of departure for the project and at the same time its source of inspiration is the one-to-one scale reconstruction of an Etrusco-Italic temple of the third/second century BCE, which was created under the direction of Barnabei between 1889 and 1890 in the gardens of the villa on the occasion of the museum’s inauguration (Fig. 4).



Fig. 4. Villa Giulia: the reconstruction of the Etrusco-Italic temple of Alatri built at the end of the 19th century by A. Cozza and at the center of the project “The Temple Machine” (©MiBAC, Villa Giulia National Etruscan Museum. Ph. M. Benedetti).

Created for didactic as well as scientific purposes and realized with amazing museographic foresight, the reconstruction of the temple was based on data obtained from an excavation carried out by Bernabei himself a few years earlier at Alatri, a small town of Lower Lazio famous for its walls in polygonal masonry.

Over the years, however, the temple lost its original functions and was transformed into a simple storeroom, inaccessible to the public.

Among the principle aims of the Temple Project is the total rehabilitation of the Temple of Alatri and the creation of an evocative, fully immersive multimedia exhibition inside the structure. This exhibition will serve to integrate the historical record offered by the Villa Giulia Museum and to reassert its connection with the territory through high-resolution video projections and features which will allow the visitor to enjoy a multisensory storytelling experience (involving sight, hearing, smell, and touch) as part of a series of virtual itineraries.

The aims of the project overlap in many respects with the official mission of the museum, which is to function as a point of attraction and reference for all the entities that it represents and that identify with it, as was recently demonstrated by a series of conferences in which over forty museums from Lazio, Umbria, and Tuscany took part, between November and May, having been invited to speak about their outreach efforts and to tell their stories at the Villa Giulia.

In this way, the Villa Giulia will be able to not only integrate the story of its collections (perhaps extending that story to include the villa's more recent phases) but reestablish a direct relationship, albeit virtually, with the territories that its collections represent, as well as encourage visitors to learn more about the cultural resources of the territories through the creation of a real integrated territorial network.

A second project provides for the implementation of nocturnal projections on the surfaces of the villa's architecture, including the villa's extraordinary courtyard and nymphaeum. Again, the use of multimedia and virtual reality will be in the service of creating an immersive narrative intended to be evocative on the mode of similar successful projects, such as designed by Paco Lanciano and Piero Angelo in the imperial fora.

The third and final component of the project focuses on the renovation of the "Neviera," a Renaissance-era nymphaeum excavated in a bank of tufo forming part of the hill to the southwest of the villa. The Neviera too has been partially transformed into a mundane storeroom but remains decorated with Renaissance-era stucco and painted decoration.

The terminal part of the Neviera on the basis of its structural characteristics, which resemble those of a tholos, in fact lends itself to the reconstruction of a funerary space, thanks also to the display of artifacts currently stored in the storerooms.

In this contribution, I have sought to give only a quick, non-exhaustive preview of the projects that we hope to carry out in the next years at the Villa Giulia, the realization of which has been a goal of mine since my appointment as director and has included a plan for locating the necessary funds. The Temple Machine constitutes only one part of our development plan, within which one also hopes to soon be able to proceed with the renovation of other spaces which for a long time have remained inaccessible:

- The 2000 square meters of the "Riganti tannery," an industrial complex born in 1870 in the area of the gardens of Villa Poniatowski, a space ideal for temporary exhibitions and the realization of multifunctional spaces (bookshop, restaurant, conference rooms, etc.) (Fig. 5).

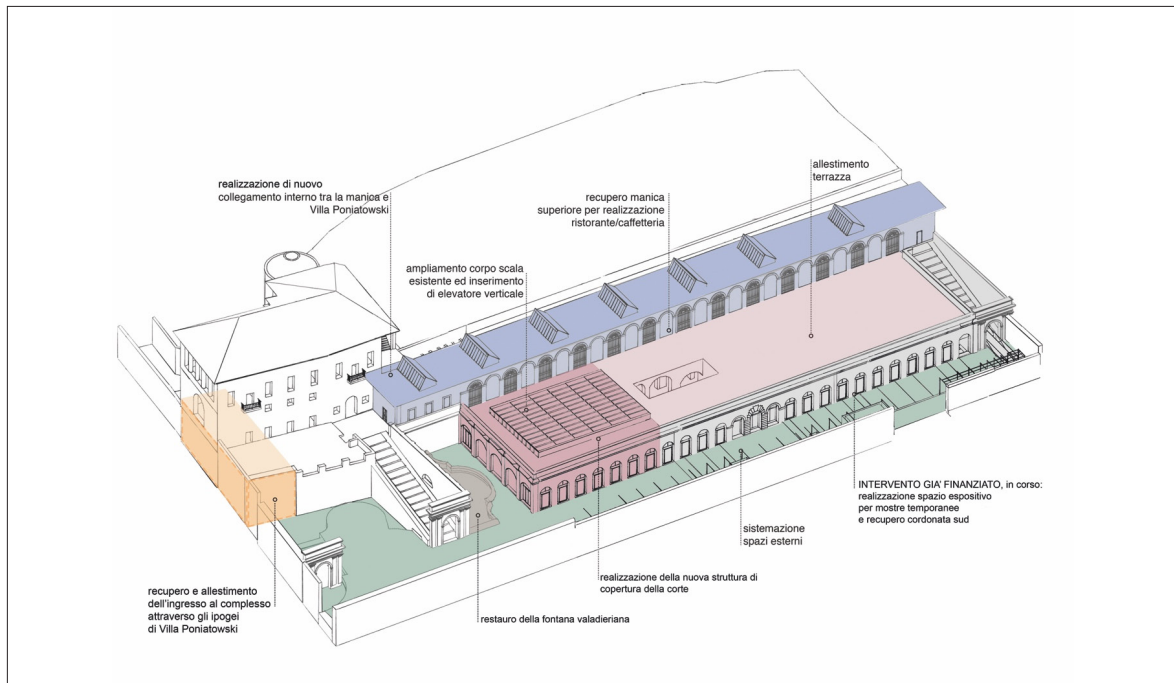


Fig. 5. State of fact and reconstruction of the interventions falling on the Riganti's Tanneries of Villa Poniatowski (elaboration of the Prof. A. Grimaldi's team, Faculty of Architecture, 'Sapienza', Rome).

- The room frescoed with zodiac imagery in front of the nymphaeum of the Villa Giulia, where a section of the Museum designed for recounting the various phases which preceded its establishment, from the Roman period to 1889, passing naturally through the Renaissance, will be installed.

All of the project proposals outlined above revolve or will need to revolve around certain key concepts, which are particularly significant for situations with a prevalent historical connotation, such as archaeological contexts. With these key concepts, I will end my contribution in a necessarily schematic format without occupying myself with further comments:

Participation and Engagement:

To promote the active participation of the public in their visit through virtual and traditional aids that allow for interaction, discovery, and learning in the most engaging way.

Excitement and Fun:

To employ equipment and exhibition solutions that enrich the visitor's experience on an emotional level, promoting the dynamics and mechanisms of "experiential learning" with the aid of supports capable of creating a constructive sensory appeal (through sight, sound, smell, and memory) and to encourage cognitive processes and discovery through activities and engagement.

Historic Narrative:

To avoid storytelling as an end in itself and to employ historical data critically and contextually as an instrument of narrative, avoiding technical language and maintaining an engaging discourse with the aid of rhetorical devices capable of holding the visitor's attention.

Immersive and Multisensory Experience (neural appeal):

To encourage a cognitive experience through a multisensory museum itinerary, avoiding above all the use of invasive and alienating observational instruments, such as goggles/glasses, in the belief that an experience of learning and discovery that is shared and collective (as, for example, in the cinema or theater) is more evocative and meaningful.

Spatial and Chronological Contextualization:

To try to always contextualize in time and space the information imparted to the visitor, so that he/she is able to then construct a personal mental map into which he/she can insert “egocentrically” new information as acquired incrementally.

Connecting the Dots: The Temporal and Spatial Map as Mnemonic Device for Relational Learning:

On the basis of the principles outlined above, to promote cognitive mechanisms that are able to create links between the personal experiences of the user and the narrative offered by the display (relational learning).

Interactive Learning and “Social” Projection of the Visitor’s Experience

To allow the visitor to express instantaneously emotions, reactions, and the relational processes tested in the course of the visit to his/her circle of acquaintances via social media, offering to the user all the necessary tools (free WiFi connection, dedicated apps, the museum’s social profiles) in order to promote such interactions.

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