

**Alessandro Faraggiana, Ugo Ferrandi
and the Birth of the Museum of Novara**

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Like many Italian natural history museums, the origins of the Faraggiana Ferrandi Museum of Natural History of Novara can be traced back to the first scientific collections donated to the city in the first half of the XIX century. In the case of the Novara museum, the founding and subsequent growth are rooted in the endowments, which characterised the second half of the century, in the first decades after the Unification of Italy.

Today, the Museum of Novara consists of two distinct sections, naturalistic and ethnographic. These two “souls” of the museum do, however, come together historically. In fact, the interest of the major patrons who made possible the establishment of the museum was directed towards both the natural sciences and ethnography, in accordance with the scientific-colonialist culture, which characterised the dawn of Italian society.

A few decades after its unity, Italy — now feeling itself a nation — turned to Africa, as a late-comer imitating the great European powers. The 1880s and 90s witnessed Italy’s inroads into Northeastern Africa: in 1889, Somalia came under Italian dominion, followed by Eritrea in 1890. The 1890s were also the years of failed attempts at expansion in Africa, which led to the first Italo-Ethiopian War (1894–1896), ending with the defeat of both Amba Alagi and Adua.

Youthful Italian bourgeois society looked upon the vast unexplored regions of the African Continent, and this led to scientific journeys, which became both the habit of scions of rich families as well as a true scientific passion for men of culture and lovers of adventure. Both began bringing back to Italy from overseas naturalistic specimen and handcrafts of the peoples of the colonies. These they displayed in their homes, thus constituting the nuclei of several Italian scientific and ethnographic museums. Against this backdrop, although each in their own way, the Faraggiana family and Captain Ugo Ferrandi, have the singular merit of having made the most significant contribution to the birth of the Novara Museum.

**THE FARAGGIANA FAMILY AND THE FOUNDING OF THE
NATURAL HISTORY MUSEUM OF NOVARA**

All of the members of the Faraggiana family, which had settled in Novara in 1821, were passionate students of the natural sciences. More than any, Catherine Faraggiana Ferrandi (1856–1940) had a veritable passion for animals, which led her to turn the park of her villa in Meina into a private zoo, featuring parrots, ostriches, monkeys, gazelles, and antelope.

As these animals were prepared taxidermically after their deaths, through the years Mrs. Faraggiana acquired a considerable natural history collection, which she augmented with gifts from friends, including the explorer Ugo Ferrandi. She added her collection specimens that her son Alessandro brought back from his African safaris and his other numerous journeys. Alessandro

(1876–1961) was a hunting enthusiast and an amateur explorer (Fig. 1), but he was also a man of great culture and a true connoisseur of the African continent and its peoples. He carried out numerous journeys under the auspices of the *Società Geografica Italiana*,¹ which led him to draft two reports on ethnographic subjects: *Alcune notizie sui Suk e sui Turkana*² (Faraggiana 1908) and *Ricordi di un'escursione ad Arcangelsk ed alla Nuova Zemlia*³ (Faraggiana 1910).

The Faraggiana's zoological collection also encompassed ethnographic objects and was

preserved inside large showcases in the family's Meina Villa (Figs. 2a–c). From reconstructions that have been made, it is known that the collection wound its way through ten rooms and was contained in showcases made-to-measure. The primates were located on the ground floor, with birds in the second room and predators in the third, which were followed on the next floor by reptiles, batrachians, and other groups.

In 1937, Alessandro convinced his mother Catherine to deed the naturalistic collection to the City of Novara. In the same year, the town government purchased the *Palazzo Faraggiana*, located in Novara, with the intention of displaying therein the naturalistic and ethnographic collections. However, this was interrupted by the outbreak of the Second World War and the collection thus remained in Meina until 1946.

Before it took shape as a real museum, the naturalistic collection underwent the travails typical of many collections that are acquired by civil administrators, without a precise plan for their use and without the funds necessary to make them operational. These vicissitudes included being moved repeatedly, temporarily displayed, transferred and relegated to various locations, etc. The Faraggiana collection followed this path in part, although it differed from the collections of other cities in that it had a happy ending. Transferred to Novara in several stages between 1946 and 1948, the collection was, in part, displayed in 1949, together with the Ferrandi collection, in several rooms of the *Palazzo del Mercato*, although the display was immediately taken down to make way for remodelling work that had to be done to the building. In 1957, the collection was once again displayed in seven rooms of the *Palazzo Faraggiana*, using the original showcases that had been built for use at the Villa of Meina. In 1976, thanks to financial intervention by the *Faraggiana Foundation*, three rooms were set up to feature the Italian fauna, as a model for what the future naturalistic museum was to be. However, it was not until the year 2000 that the Novara museum opened to the public, in the form of a modern, spacious museum.

Alessandro Faraggiana should, therefore, indubitably be credited with the birth of the museum

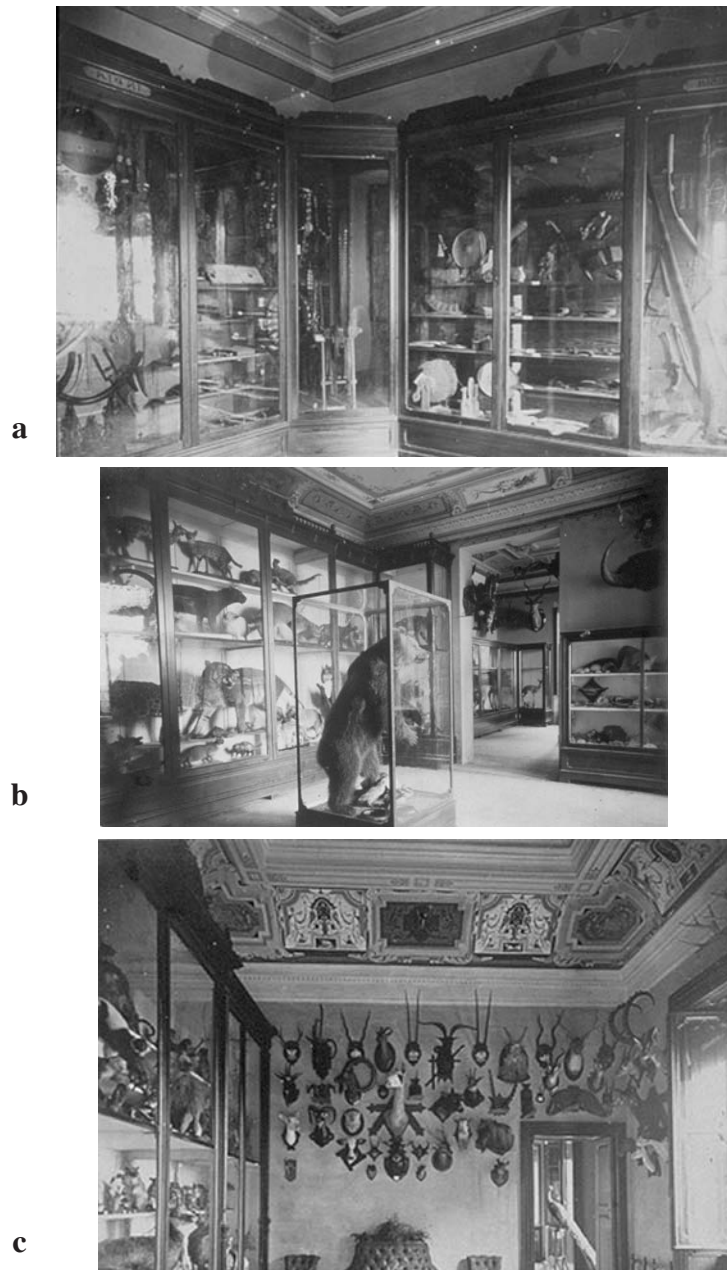


FIGURE 1. Alessandro Faraggiana e una sua preda durante il viaggio che effettuò nel 1908 fra le tribù dei Suk e dei Turkana (Archivio del Museo Civico di Storia Naturale di Novara). Alessandro Faraggiana and his prey during the journey in 1908 between Suk and Turkana tribes. (Natural History Municipal Museum Archive-Novara.)

¹ Italian Geographic Society.

² A Few Notes on the Suk and the Turkana.

³ Report on and Excursion to Arcangelsk and to New Zemlia.



FIGURES 2a–c. La collezione zoologica Faraggiana come era esposta nelle stanze della Villa di Meina fino al 1946 (Archivio del Museo Civico di Storia Naturale di Novara). Faraggiana's zoological collection as exposed in the rooms in his Villa in Meina till 1946. (Natural History Municipal Museum Archive-Novara.)

of Novara, whose further development he also guaranteed by crafting a Foundation to sustain its activities. This foundation was established upon Faraggiana's death in 1961, in accordance with the dispositions of his last will and testament (Leoni 1998).

THE NOVARA MUSEUM OF NATURAL HISTORY TODAY

Open to the public and completely refurbished, the Novara Museum of Natural History still bears the name of Faraggiana Ferrandi. However, the modern organisation of its displays, its primarily informative and didactic intent, its refined and elegant graphic presentation, and the careful selection of colours, texts, and pictures clearly set it apart from the romantic notions that imbued the founding of the museum at the outset of the 20th century. Situated in the former city residence of the Faraggiana family, the museum winds its way through 12 rooms, in which the zoological material is displayed according to zoogeographic and ecological criteria (Bellani 2000a, 2000b).

The story of the Faraggiana family's naturalistic collection — today enriched and complemented by numerous new and important acquisitions, as well as collections that were previously bequeathed to the city — had a happy ending, with the setting up of a modern museum of natural history. The same, however, cannot be said of the ethnographic section, which, although it was initially displayed in the rooms of the *Palazzo del Mercato*, today lies in a storeroom, well preserved in its original showcases, but hidden from public view.

The Ethnographic Collection of the Museum of Novara

We said the Faraggiana family collection also encompassed ethnographic objects, including the objects collected in person by Alessandro Faraggiana during his journeys to Lake Victoria. However, these objects constitute a minute part of the family's collection, and hence of the current ethnographic section of the museum. The bulk of this section is made up of Captain Ugo Ferrandi's collection (Fig. 3), constituted by an initial donation to the museum of 107 "*African objects and arms*" he himself made in 1889, followed by a second block bequeathed to the museum in 1928. This second block contained, in addition to the explorer's personal antiques, a conspicuous collection of ethnographic materials brought back to Italy from his explorations in Eritrea and Somalia from 1886 to 1923.

An important portion of the museum's ethnographic collection was not part of the Ferrandi endowment, but rather it contains many items donated to the city of Novara by military personnel who had been involved in the Italian history in Africa, such as General Baldassarre Orero (Begozzi and Mignemi 1981), Commander Carlo Genè, and General Antonio Baldissera.

It may, thus, be stated that the ethnographic section of the Museum of Novara, for the most part, was the result of travels, whether they were pleasure trips, as in the case of Faraggiana, or for duty, as in the case of the military expeditions, which I have just mentioned, or in the case of real explorations, led for scientific purposes by Ugo Ferrandi.

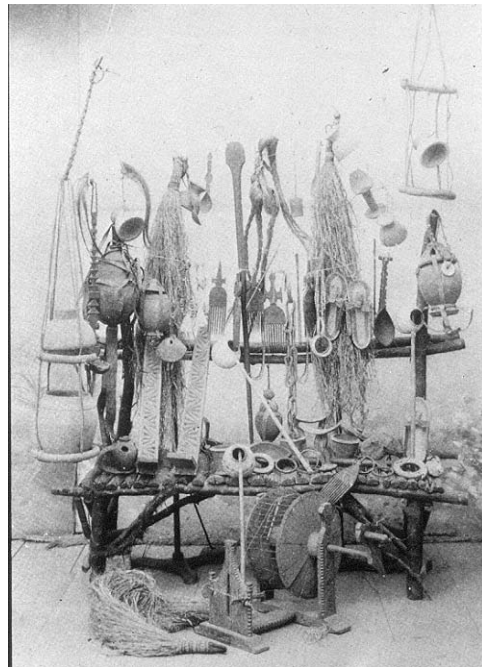


FIGURE 3. Oggetti etnografici raccolti da Ugo Ferrandi ed esposti come trofei. Museo Civico Ugo Ferrandi (Archivio di Stato di Novara, album Ferrandi n. 9). Ethnographic objects picked up by Ugo Ferrandi and exposed as trophies. Municipal Museum Ugo Ferrandi. (Archivio di Stato, Ferrandi's Album n. 9.)

This was also the case for other Italian explorers, who donated their collections to their native cities, thus making it possible to set up ethnographic museums, or ethnographic sections hosted in natural history museums. Some of the most emblematic examples of this trend were the collections of Vittorio Bottego, which was donated to the city of Parma, those of the Venetian explorer, Giovanni Miani, today displayed in the Venice Museum of Natural History, or of the explorer Orazio Antinori, today located in the Perugia Museum of Archaeology (Castelli 1984). These are special museums, whose interest resides in the fact that they may be “read” from two different points of view: from a European viewpoint, as documents of the history of exploration, and from a universal perspective, as testimony of cultures that — as in all cultures — have the right to be understood and not interpreted.

UGO FERRANDI

Ugo Ferrandi, born in Novara in 1852, master mariner, was well known in Italy as an explorer (Gavello 1975; Begozzi and Mignemi 1981). He travelled in Eastern Africa between Somalia and Eritrea, driven by a passion that he seemed to have had since early childhood, but which he only succeeded in fulfilling after his 30th birthday. In fact, he did not set foot on African soil until 1886, when he took part in the ill-fated Franzoi Expedition to Harrar. This expedition failed to reach its objectives, and that led the then Italian Foreign Minister to describe the members of the expedition as “travellers or pseudo-explorers, who, since they were not equipped for their journeys with the necessary gravity of character or understanding, but only a bizarre spirit of adventure, or greed for quick gains, procured the Government no small embarrassment, danger and onerous expenses”.

The disastrous outcome of the Franzoi expedition was not sufficient to diminish Ferrandi’s passion for exploration (Fig. 4). However, because of the controversies stirred up by that failure, and his inability at that time to organise a full-fledged expedition, he decided to follow General San Marzano in Eritrea as a correspondent for the newspaper *Roma* of Naples. He then remained in Africa, on the Somali Coast, as an agent for Bienenfeld, a maritime commercial undertaking. This enabled him to begin his series of expeditions.

From 1886 to 1889, Ferrandi travelled in Harrar. In 1891, he explored the course of the Giuba River between Brava and Mansur as an envoy of the company *Esplorazione Commerciale di Milano*, which desired to pave the way for Italian inroads into the heart of the country. In 1893, the same company, dissatisfied with the results of the first expedition, once again sent Ferrandi to explore the course of the Giuba in a journey that led him from Brava to Bardera. Finally, in 1895, he explored the area directly inland from the Somali Coast between Brava and Kisimajo (Gavello 1981).

In 1895, Ferrandi joined the Vittorio Bottego expedition, which was on its way to Lugh, where



FIGURE 4. I partecipanti alla sfortunata spedizione Franzoi del 1886 nell’Harrar. Da sinistra: Armando Rondani, Augusto Franzoi e Ugo Ferrandi. Participants to the unlucky Franzoi expedition in 1886 in Harrar region. From the left: Armando Rondani, Augusto Franzoi, unidentified, and Ugo Ferrandi.

he remained for a while. During his stay in Lugh, he made many ethnographic and scientific observations, which he described in his best known publication, *Lugh, emporio Commerciale sul Giuba*,⁴ published in 1903 (Ferrandi 1903).

In 1897, Ferrandi returned from Lugh to Brava and in 1902, in Novara, published the travelogue: *Itinerari Africani: da Lugh alla costa*.⁵

Ferrandi was not a scientist, and he, therefore, left behind few writings; thus, his expeditions may only be studied by reference to his letters and a few articles that were published in the journal *L'Esplorazione Commerciale*.

Ferrandi's explorer's mind-set pervades the collection, which is also imbued with the colonialist approach typical of Italian bourgeois society of the period. The collection was set up with the intention of illustrating the uses and customs of the local populations, while eschewing the search for precious objects, or ones that would be remarkable merely for their aesthetic merit. Thus, the collection contains primarily everyday objects, clothes, textiles, decorations, weapons, and tools, which today constitute a precious witness to the populations of the African Horn from the period around the dawn of the 20th century.

WHEN CAN WE EXPECT AN ETHNOGRAPHIC MUSEUM IN NOVARA?

I observed earlier that after an extremely brief appearance in the Palazzo del Mercato, the Ferrandi collection, together with other ethnographic collections and the zoological collections, was displayed in 1957 in the Palazzo Faraggiana. There it remained open to the public until 1981 (Fig. 5) when it was placed in storage to allow for remodeling work to be done in the building. However, after this work was completed, the city government of Novara decided to reduce the museum's space by allotting a wing of the building to the offices of the City Planning Section, which occupies the spaces to this day. The ethnographic collection has, thus, remained in storage where it may be visited only by specialists on specific request.

I do not wish to go into detail here regarding the make-up of the Ferrandi collection, since the purpose of my writing is to highlight how journeys — both scientific and non-scientific — brought about in many places in Italy the birth of natural history or ethnographic museums. At times (as in the case of the natural history section of the Novara museum), these museums evolved into modern facilities (Fig. 6), whereas at other times, the collections have fallen into oblivion. All of these



FIGURE 5. Una delle sale della collezione etnografica del Museo di Novara come si presentavano prima della chiusura al pubblico, avvenuta nel 1981 (Archivio del Museo Civico di Storia Naturale di Novara). One of the rooms of the Ethnographic Collection of the Municipal Museum as it was before the closing to the public of 1981. (Archive of Municipal Museum of Natural History.)

⁴ Lugh, Trading Post on the Giuba.

⁵ African Itineraries: from Lugh to the Coast.



FIGURE 6. Come si presenta oggi il Museo Civico di Storia Naturale di Novara, dopo l'apertura al pubblico avvenuta nel febbraio 2000. "La garzaia" (Foto Gallarate). A view of the Municipal Museum of Natural History after the opening to public in February 2000. "Heronry" (Foto Gallarate).

museums are, at any rate, the product — as is any ethnographic museum — of collections made at the “expense” of local populations, that is all of them are the result of the plundering of native cultures.

We must begin to reflect on these facts, also in Italy. Today, the ethnographic museum communities of both Europe and North America have been shaken by the request made by the legitimate owners for the restitution of the objects preserved in museums. The Native Americans of both the United States and Canada, the Inuit, the African states, the Aborigine communities of Australia are all loudly requesting the return of elements of their cultural heritage, and, thus, the museums of Europe — and the governments which run them — are faced with a moral dilemma.

Italy, which has sought to avoid the memory of its colonial past, seems not to have been touched by the problem of the restitution of extra-European ethnographic objects, although several institutions voluntarily are actively involved in the restitution of archaeological collections, which had been smuggled out of their countries of origin.

However, it behoves Italian museums, too, to consider the moral problem posed by the mere fact that they possess objects from foreign cultures, and that the museums have a duty to perform towards their former owners.

I am not saying that the ethnographic museums should return materials, which also constitute a portion of Italian history, but I submit that all of us, the museums and in particular the museum administrations responsible for them, are morally obligated to treat these objects with dignity, for a variety of reasons. Firstly, having been seized from other cultures, they are not truly the museums’ property; secondly, they were collected by individuals who often risked their lives to do so; and thirdly, the objects have an inherent and universal value as cultural documentation.

I, therefore, submit that out of respect for other cultures, it is no longer tolerable for the Italian ethnographic collections to continue to be kept in precarious conditions, for their materials to deteriorate. It is essential that they be displayed to the public in a dignified manner, so that also their former owners — peoples, many of whom today inhabit our cities — may visit them without experiencing a sense of frustration (De Palma 2000).

The Ferrandi collection and the entire ethnographic section of the Museum of Novara, although well stored, cannot be viewed by the public. This is also the case for a select group of other museums, whose ethnographic collections remain in storage, while the important Museum of Ethnology and Anthropology of Florence seems to be a demonstration of how not to set up an ethnographic museum. Only the Pigorini Museum of Rome is currently undergoing the type of remodelling worthy of the collections it possesses.

This brief introduction is, therefore, primarily an appeal that in Italy — where so much mention is made of culture and of multi-culturalism — the extra-European ethnographic collections be given the consideration the products of every civilisation merit, and that the fact be taken into account that what might seem even the smallest and least significant of ethnographic objects has for the people who produced or used it, a symbolic significance that transcends its monetary value and should therefore be respected at all costs.

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