

Elio Modigliani's view of Nias: a case study of 19th century ethnological collection criteria

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ABSTRACT

In this article we tested the assumption that nineteenth century ethnological collectionism was restricted towards "pure", uncontaminated and "primitive" objects. We choose as a case study the 1886 ethnographic collection of Elio Modigliani (Florence, 1860 - Viareggio, 1932) from Nias, an island North-West of Sumatra. Modigliani was a paradigmatic figure of the 19th century scientific collector and he supposedly followed these collection criteria. However, our study on the collection as well as primary sources reveals that Modigliani intentionally collected objects and artifacts that were contaminated "from outside" contacts. Indeed, Modigliani even investigated how these new elements were included and integrated into Nias material culture.

Key words:

museology, Indonesia, colonialism, anthropology, metamorphic objects.

RIASSUNTO

Elio Modigliani a Nias: un caso di studio sui criteri di collezionismo etnologico nell'Ottocento

In questo articolo abbiamo testato l'affermazione che il collezionismo etnologico del diciannovesimo secolo fosse limitato alla ricerca e selezione di oggetti "puri", incontaminati e "primitivi". Abbiamo scelto come caso di studio la collezione etnografica realizzata nel 1886 da Elio Modigliani, figura rappresentativa del collezionista scientifico di quell'epoca, considerato esponente di questi criteri del collezionismo. Tuttavia dal nostro studio sulla collezione e sulle fonti primarie emerge chiaramente che Modigliani collezionò intenzionalmente oggetti e materiali "from outside" e indagò come questi nuovi elementi fossero inclusi e integrati nella cultura materiale di Nias.

Parole chiave:

museologia, Indonesia, colonialismo, antropologia, oggetti metamorfici.

INTRODUCTION

Here we test an assumption often repeated in the literature that nineteenth century ethnological collectionism was predominately and preferentially oriented towards "pure" authentic objects. According to this hypothesis, early ethnologists considered only "pure" objects uncontaminated by outside contacts, especially from "civilized" cultures, as worthy of collection. We choose as a case study the 1886 ethnographic collection of Elio Modigliani from Nias, an island North-West of Sumatra. Modigliani (Florence, 1860 - Viareggio, 1932) is a paradigmatic figure of the voyager, explorer and collector from the last half of the 19th century (Puccioni, 1932; Bigoni & Barbagli, 2023) and he has often been considered as representative of these collection criteria.

The Museum of Anthropology and Ethnology in

Florence (Italy) preserves a vast nucleus of more than 2,000 objects collected by Modigliani from various islands West of Sumatra (Nias, Engano, Mentawai Archipelago) and from Sumatra itself (Bigoni et al., 2019a, 2019b). We choose to concentrate on the Nias collection that is highly representative of Modigliani's approach during his first expedition. The Nias expedition and the ethnological collection were also documented in great detail by Modigliani in his book (1890), articles and letters (1886, 1887a, 1887b, 1887c, 1889, 1890). We also took into consideration studies written by influential scholars of his time including Enrico Giglioli and Paolo Mantegazza (Giglioli, 1890; Mantegazza, 1902).

We thought that a systematic analysis of Modigliani's Nias collection was a good test of hypotheses on 19th century collection criteria. Indeed, it is often stated that Modigliani collection choices were dic-

tated by attention solely on the basis that only "pure and primitive" (uncontaminated) objects were worthy of attention (Taylor, 1995). In this perspective nineteenth century professional anthropologists and ethnologists actively tended to exclude artefacts that showed mixtures and acquisition of "modern" and "civilized" materials: "For a very long time – in fact until fairly recently – a frequently used criterion for selection was the 'traditional' nature of artifacts, based on the assumption that supposedly pristine traditional cultures were contaminated as a result of their contact with Western colonial societies and that the goal was to keep a record of vanishing cultures" (Feest, 2013: 189).

Similar claims are present in recent Italian scholars' contributions. Describing collecting of North American artifacts, it was stressed that: "Authenticity, of objects in this case, is connected to a precise time that is identified as the 'precontact' period of time. Contact between Whites and Natives in this sense is a strong marker of time, considering that starting with this point in time one speaks of a before and an after, that then, as we have seen, has strong repercussions regarding the practices of appropriation of artifacts. Objects that show tangible signs of this contact are left behind [...]" (Rossi, 2022: 11).

Therefore, according to this vision, "contaminated" objects have only recently been considered worthy of collection. In the past, they would have been collected and then preserved only by amateur, uneducated collectors. "Fortunately, most museums were rarely able to assemble their collections exclusively on the basis of professional ethnographic collecting, following strict guidelines, and have acquired (often through gifts) the collections of traveling amateurs, which included objects that otherwise might never have been preserved" (Feest, 2013: 189).

Nineteenth-century collections from Indonesia do not escape this interpretation. Interestingly, the same claim was specifically referred in the international literature to Elio Modigliani: "Elio Modigliani's collections, especially from the islands of Nias and Enggano off western Sumatra, and from the Batak of North Sumatra, make up the great majority of Indonesian materials at the Museum of Anthropology in Florence, Italy [...] and reflect his search for the most primitive (rather than most common) forms" (Taylor, 1995: 109).

We studied the collection and the documentation written by Modigliani and his contemporaries to discuss and eventually test if these claims are correct: did really Modigliani collect only "primitive" forms of objects? Did he search for the "pure" object? Did he write about his idea of artifacts' "authenticity"?

We found other relevant elements to our discussion in the article by Pieter ter Keurs (2023) dealing with "object from outside" in Indonesian culture on Enggano, and by Mai Lin Tjoa-Bonatz and Mikael Hård,

"Creole Objects and Techniques: Gold Mining, Gold Panning and Gold Working in Colonial Indonesia" (2021). These articles witness the rising interest for the presence and inclusion of objects and materials from "outside" in traditional cultures.

THE COLLECTOR CHOICE: THEORIES AND INSTRUCTIONS

In 1881, Elio Modigliani became a member of the Società Italiana di Antropologia e Etnologia, at a very young age of 21. He was mentored in ethnology by Paolo Mantegazza and Enrico Giglioli. He also had a collaboration with the Genovese naturalist Arturo Issel, and Giacomo Doria. Doria (1840-1913), the founder of the Museum of Natural History of Genova (1867), became also President of the Italian Geographical Society (1891-1900). Doria was a very important personality of the time who held political roles as Mayor of Genova and senator of the State. Therefore, the young Modigliani became a member of a network, which included the most important scientific national institutions of that time (Museum of Anthropology and Ethnology of Florence, Museum of Natural Sciences of Genoa, Italian Society for Anthropology and Ethnology, Italian Geographical Society) and the influential personalities who animated them.

It is of undoubted interest to understand the collecting criteria widespread among scholars, explorers and collectors at the time of Modigliani's departure for Nias, and eventually find shared orientations to which he could have complied. Since the 1870s, the Instructions for the study of comparative psychology had taken hold in Italy and France. Central actor of this process was the French Charles Letourneau who, on 30th March 1873, supported Mantegazza's proposal to create a special commission within the Italian Society of Anthropology and Ethnology (Zannetti, 1873). The instructions, in the form of a structured questionnaire with 252 questions, were presented in the meeting of the Society, on the 20th of April and published in a very short time (1873). The authors were Paolo Mantegazza, Enrico Hillyer Giglioli and Letourneau himself, who the following year translated the Instructions into French and published them in the *Revue d'Anthropologie*, contributing to the creation of a tool that will then be widely adopted (Letourneau, 1874; Landucci, 2005). Subsequently, only five years before Modigliani's departure for Nias, a volume of over 550 pages dedicated to scientific instructions for travelers, was edited by the Genoese naturalist Arturo Issel and published (Giglioli & Zannetti, 1881).

The text, which dealt with all naturalistic disciplines, is the result of contributions written by various authors: Arturo Zannetti wrote the section relating to anthropology, while Enrico Hillyer Giglioli took

care of Ethnology. In this case the structure of the instructions was not put in the form of a questionnaire, but of a real essay. It was divided into a long introductory part with general considerations on the discipline and on individual fields of investigation, followed by the part dedicated to measurements and observations. Only a synthetic final part concerns the theme of collections and indication for the collection of objects. This text stressed the importance of paying attention to clothing, ornaments, weapons, tools, utensils, instruments, defining everything equally important and deploring that "it is not possible to collect the entire house and villages" (Giglioli & Zannetti, 1881).

OBJECTS FROM NIAS: ONLY "ORIGINAL" ARTEFACTS?

In 1887, Modigliani donated to the Florentine Museum the first group of artefacts collected during the journey to Nias (1886). During the following explorations Modigliani continued collecting intensively. In 1904 a second, large batch of artefacts was acquired by the Museum. This second group was formed by collections from the journeys to Sumatra Batak villages, Engano island (1891) and Sipòra island of the Mentawai Archipelago (1894), but included also a consistent number of other objects from the earlier Nias expedition. We studied the Nias collection housed in the Museum of about 190 artefacts (cf. Bigoni et al., 2019b). For this study we selected a number of objects that were particularly relevant for this essay and studied them in details, looking for information in the primary sources, with a great attention to "Un viaggio a Nias" (1890), a precious guide to Modigliani knowledge, approaches and experience during the expedition. This ponderous volume is completed by meticulous drawings of many artefacts described in the text, allowing the comparison with objects presently in Museum and their reconnection to information collected by Modigliani on the field.

Canòlo and his ornaments

Within the Florentine Nias exhibit there is a striking statue of Canòlo, son of the chief of Hili Djióno (Southern Nias). Modigliani described him as a friendly young man who was easily persuaded to pose in front of the camera wearing ceremonial clothes and ornaments. A color chromolithograph image of the young warrior was used for the cover of Modigliani's book "Un viaggio a Nias" (1890). This plaster statue was created following photographic images by Giuseppe Felli, who was working at that time in the Museum. Modigliani provided a detailed description of Canòlo that included different kinds of ornaments and the statue perfectly matches the book representation of clothing and accessories. The statue is adorned

with the original local vegetable fiber clothing and a number of accessories and weapons. The imposing helmet, the rigid breastplate, the spear, the elaborate war knife and the shield, all communicate his role as a young warrior and as the designated future leader of the village. The young warrior also wears beaded necklaces and a heavy metal earring, ornaments also present in the original photograph (fig. 1). Modigliani notes that the bead necklaces that he collected were imported and that: "On the other hand, both the enormous earring hanging from his right ear and the circle around his neck are indigenously made. This [circle around his neck] is the Calabúbo, a Nias decoration given by the village Chief to warriors who have successfully hunted human heads and is usually made of a special wood" (translated from Modigliani, 1890: 182). These breastplates were awarded to young people as a rite of passage during induction into the group of adult warriors and were very rare in European museums: Modigliani had only seen a unique specimen in the Leiden Museum during his preparatory trip to The Netherlands (Modigliani, 1890). In his book he talks about recognizing many of them in every village and also stresses how difficult it was to obtain specimens, despite rich exchange offers. Despite these difficulties, the Florence collection



Fig. 1. Detail of plaster statue of Canòlo, young warrior and son of the chief of Hili Djióno (Southern Nias). He wears an imposing metal helmet, a rigid breastplate (Calabúbo), beaded necklaces and a heavy earring (photo by Saulo Bambi).

currently includes four Calabúbo. Giglioli, following Modigliani, defined the Calabúbo as “a beautiful collar made of thin circular sections cut out of the double nut of the *Lodoicea Seychellarum* (which is often cast by see on the island), neatly strung on a brass wire with a circular brass disk at the junction. The sections of the nut diminish gradually from about an inch in diameter to less than half at both ends, where the circular collar is closed with the disk; they are polished so as to present a uniform surface” (Giglioli, 1890: 588). Modigliani’s description, however, is much broader and more detailed. He argues that Calabúbo was produced with a material coming from outside and for this reason considered precious. Particular properties were attributed to it: “At first sight these rings may appear to have been cut from a coconut shell, but the minute examination of their fibers reveals that they belong to the *Lodoicea Seychellarum*. The fruits of this plant, which is not native to the Malay region but which, as its name suggests, belongs to the flora of the Seychelles islands, very close to the south-east coast of Africa (Map IV), are often thrown by the currents onto the islands of Malay Archipelago and when the natives find them, amazed at not recognizing in them any of the fruits of their land, they believe them to be endowed with various virtues, among which that of helping against fevers [...]. It is therefore natural that the Nías, unknowingly suffering the influence that makes other peoples of Malaysia believe those fruits are rich in strange virtues, chose them to make the collars of their warriors, perhaps believing that they are a protection and that they give strength. The same difficulty in obtaining them then increases the cost with which the Calabúbo is kept and makes it a very precious object. I was able to procure only five out of many hundreds that I saw in various villages and even those five with great difficulty. Overall, even as an ornament, it is very beautiful, especially after being rubbed for a long time with coconut oil which makes it take on a beautiful shiny black color” (translated, 1890: 215-216).

Two versions of helmet

The statue of Canòlo wears an elaborate metal helmet on his head: we have many details regarding this artifact directly from Modigliani. The metals with which these helmets were made came from outside the island. Originally the ornaments that top this elaborate headdress were covered in gold foil, according to common use on the island to symbolize power and authority. To the reluctant Chief, Canòlo’s father who did not want to exchange the object, Modigliani explained during the long negotiation that he was not interested in the gold covering and in the end he obtained the object without the precious covering. Modigliani detailed: “I do not think I am wrong in supposing that these helmets, now commonly made on the island by indigenous artists,



Fig. 2. Detail of headgear made from woven *Arenga saccharifera* fibers and used for protection in battles.

derive their model from similar styles used in China or Japan, from which countries some specimens must have been imported to Nías in other times” (translated, 1890: 226). However, this was not the only type of protective headgear that was used in fighting, there was also an older form made from woven *Arenga saccharifera* fibers (fig. 2). The headgear was used for protection in battles and represented the typology of traditional helmet. Modigliani avidly collected both types of helmets.

Sirih’s paraphernalia

Modigliani documented a series of small tools, containers and pipes used for the preparation and consumption of tobacco and Sirih, a mixture of tobacco, crushed Areca nut and powder obtained by mollusk shells. This mixture was traditionally chewed or smoked. The sharing of this practice was extended to the guests as a ritual sign of peace and friendship. Modigliani collected two typologies of container to hold the shells powder, these pair of artifacts having the same use, but made with completely different materials and manufactures. The little container made from the seed of *Hodgsonia macrocarpa* (n. 5772) represents the traditional “indigenous” object, while a small octagonal decorated brass box (n. 5773), adorned with metal buttons and a tiny rattle, represents the “imported” artifacts (fig. 3).

Ornamental headbands

The collection shows various kinds of ornamental headbands used by women. The collection shows that they were traditionally produced with a variety of materials including woven vegetable fibers, cotton fabrics, ceramic and metal beads, but also other elements obtained from shells and from the reuse of coins (fig. 4). Many kinds of beads were of Chinese provenance and also elements in brass and other metals were coming from outside. The collected items demonstrate that in some cases the traditional shell ring used in traditional headbands, was replaced with a colonial coin (year 1787), perfectly matching



Fig. 3. Two little containers to hold shell powder used to prepare Sirih: one was locally made from the seed of *Hodgsonia macrocarpa*, the second is a brass octagonal box coming from "outside" (photo by Saulo Bambi).



Fig. 4. Ornamental headbands worn by women. They were traditionally produced with a variety of materials. We compare here the traditional insert of a ring obtained from shells with the insert of a colonial coin for the same use.

the description by Modigliani referring to the use of Dutch coins for this purpose (Modigliani, 1890).

Dishes

In his book Modigliani describes wooden plates traditionally produced and used daily, and ceramic plates purchased from Chinese traders. Both descriptions were accompanied by drawings and detailed explanation of different uses: wooden plates were locally manufactured, widely owned and used daily while the dishes "from outside" were owned by chiefs, and preserved for special occasions: "Indeed, they are held in such high regard that, fearing they might break, they enclose them in graceful cases [...] ingeniously made of interwoven rotang strips. They are round, with concave external sides and their interior is compartmentalized so that the two plates inserted cannot hit each other and break. They are closed by means of a vegetable binding and are kept attached to a wall of the house; twenty cases sometimes contain the chief dishes treasure" (translated from Modigliani, 1890: 492). Chinese ceramic dishes with their Nias rotang container are still well preserved in Florence (fig. 5), perfectly matching the drawing from the book. Modigliani stressed that "The dishes, which elsewhere I have said are found in the homes of the leaders, are objects of pure lux-

ury and imported from China" (translated, 1890: 576). We noticed that the wooden, traditional dish never entered in the Florentine collection. On the other hand, Modigliani also observed that very often people used simply leaves to support rice during everyday meals.

A little gold-scale

Modigliani described and collected a tiny scale (fig. 6) with two weighing dishes made of brass (1890, 151-3). We compared it with another artefact described by Tjoa-Bonatz and Hård (2021) "Due to the monetary value of gold for jewelry and gold bars and its use as a medium of local exchange, gold-weighing scales were widely used in transactions throughout the archipelago. We interpret scales as creole technologies which combine trans-local agreements on the definition of the magnitude of certain weights with locally and even individually designed weighing tools. One example consists of two weighing dishes made of tortoise shell, horn or metal suspended at equal distance hung down from a beam on fiber, metal or cotton strings. The fulcrum at its center as well as the attachments were made of wood or metal furnished by ornamental elaboration – especially on the central pole, the center of gravity of the balance" (Tjoa-Bonatz & Hård, 2021: 80-81). Correctly described as a creole



Fig. 5. Chinese plates with locally produced rotang container.



Fig. 6. Scale for weighing gold with brass plates, along with its wooden case.

object, this scale represents surely a more “traditional” item for the dish material. It was collected a few years earlier Modigliani’s expedition in Gunungsitoli/Nias and acquired by the Berlin Museum in 1881.

AUTHENTICITY VS. MYSTIFICATION

The book “Un viaggio a Nias” offers an interesting episode that clarifies Modigliani’s criteria to establish the authenticity of artifacts: “I was once brought a monstrous face (fig. 179) made with a disk taken from the inside of the base of coconut leaves, surrounded with filaments of *Arenga saccharifera* and pieces of red calico. The eyes, nose and mouth were traced very well with holes and overlapping pieces, which with the alternation of yellow, red and black colors gave the face a frightening appearance that was striking at first sight. I was told to be the image of Bèchu Lenio. I did not get it from the magician of Hili Zabòbo, from whom I was able to obtain many idols, but from an ordinary man from Hili Zabòbo. He always responded to my questions by saying: ‘lō sòchi bèchu, lō sòchi bèchu’, meaning that he was not a good spirit. However, I am not convinced that it really represents a Bèchu Lenio, because it is not usually customary to depict Bèchu in any way and if there is some special preference in favor of this, I would be very inclined to believe the object represented by figure 179 to be a mystification” (1890: 628). It is clear that Modigliani did not think that original materials and a “primitive” manufacture (though striking at the first gaze) was a good proof of authenticity. The drawing of this object let us associate this story with the mask preserved and exhibited in Florence (fig. 7).

Another episode illustrates Modigliani’s methods to establish the origin of artifacts, despite his first im-

pression, involving questioning local informants, but also comparing objects with others already collected and preserved in museums. It concerns a small shoulder strap to hold tobacco accessories for Sirih. It is made up of two overlapping bags, the innermost is made by weaving strips cut from the stem of a Cyperaceae and the outer one by weaving others taken from *Pandanus* leaves. Various pieces of yellow, red and black cotton are arranged between the two bags, enhancing the lace design. Modigliani wrote “This object is very artistically worked [...]. The doubt arose in my mind that it was a work imported from the Malays or the Chinese and I inquired about it; but I was told that it had been woven by the women of the village. Similar small handbags, also for the Sirih, are used by Bataks of Sumatra, as can be seen at the Ethnographic Museum of Leiden, where some are found made by the women of that people” (translated, 1890: 205-206).

Finally, we quote here another statement by Modigliani, which is important to establish whether the Florentine explorer was truly compelled to the search for the “primitive” object and the traditional manufacturing: “When the nias artist is not bound by traditional rites, he knows how to rise to independence of design and manages to offer us works that are beautiful for us too. European artists could truly boast of producing from their workshops those admirable carved knife handles representing boar heads and human heads, or the no less artistic statues and seats of honor that the Nias make, or the sticks, or the drawings under the helmets, or all men’s and women’s ornaments; and they certainly would not succeed if they had the few and very simple tools with which indigenous artists carve wood or sculpt stone” (translated, 1890: 569-570).



Fig. 7. Mysterious facial figure (perhaps of an evil spirit) made with the fibers of *Arenga saccharifera* and red calico, inserted in the exhibit. For comparison also a drawing adapted from Modigliani (1890: 628).

MANTEGAZZA AND HIS THEORY ABOUT METAMORPHIC OBJECTS

The official journal of the Florentine anthropological society, the *Archive*, reveals other interesting aspects of the debate on collecting that emerged in subsequent years. In 1902, on January 5th, Paolo Mantegazza himself presented to the Society a scientific communication entitled "Metamorphic objects in ethnography". His speech and the following discussion, dense of terminology and stereotype of his time, are still available in a detailed report. Mantegazza introduced a new terminology: "Borrowing the word from geologists, I call 'metamorphic' those objects which bring together elements of the wild world and civilized peoples, which have now overlapped and intertwined in such a way as to give a mixed character to the products of human work".

In contrast to the prediction that native peoples are destined to disappear in the impact with civilized peoples, widely present in the writings of the time, even by him, Mantegazza goes on to explain that: "It is very rare, indeed almost impossible, for two peoples of very different degrees of civilization and intelligence, coming into contact with each other [...] to collide in such a way that one completely destroys what belongs to the other. The most common fact is that blood, customs, morality, religion, in a word, everything that is human intermingle, in such a way as to give rise to fusions, additions, subtractions, divisions and even multiplications [...] However, the study of these fusions and these alloys has until now considered the highest products of thought, such as languages, religions and customs, while in this brief note I only want to deal with the variations that the objects worked by hand of savages or low peoples who came into contact with more civilized people, objects to which I would like to give the baptism of 'metamorphic' to distinguish them from others" (translated, 1902: 640).

Mantegazza elaborated a classification for three different categories of metamorphic artefacts: objects which still retain their ancient use and their ancient form, but in which only the material with which they are made has changed, objects of civilized peoples which are used by savages for very different uses, and objects characterized by the superposition of European elements on wild elements, almost always for ornamental purposes. To explain his theory, he used a selection of artifacts from the Museum as examples of metamorphic objects. For the second group he cited a women's bracelet made of wound, spiraled brass wire from Nias, easily identifiable with the catalogue number 5727 of Modigliani's collection (Bigoni et al., 2019a).

Mantegazza described this kind of objects as "Bed springs used by women of Hiti Zabobo (Nias) as bracelets". Ironically, neither meticulous primary sources nor catalogues mention this particular origin

of the object. It is interesting Mantegazza's statement that "This group is very rich in objects, which would be of great interest to comparative psychology and especially regarding the aesthetics of the different races, but which unfortunately are not collected by travelers. I will mention, among many, sardine cans, tin cans and other sound metal objects, which are transformed into musical instruments or ornaments. Dagger from Bissau (East Africa) in which the blade is European, the sheath is purely indigenous" (translated from Mantegazza, 1902: 641).

We add here that also the Nias collection is rich of series of knife and daggers, each of them with elaborated handles and sheathes made in Nias. Many of the handles include elaborated sculptured wood figures while the sheathes bear containers for amulets and protective elements. The material for the blade, according to Modigliani (1890), were of foreigner provenience, but worked in Nias starting from metal bars sold by Chinese sellers. Modigliani himself also recounts having successfully used various objects in Nias as exchange materials, including the omnipresent Venetian beads, and also simple but solid knives from Scarperia (a Tuscany town in Mugello, still today well known for his production of these items).

DISCUSSION

In this study, we aimed to test if Modigliani collection process followed the often repeated assertion that only "pure" objects, uncontaminated by contact were considered worthy of attention. If that is the case, we should not find "objects from outside" in Modigliani's collection. There can be no doubt that Modigliani was a professional scientific traveler and meticulous collector. Our systematic study of the Modigliani's Nias collection showed that he definitely did not choose only the "primitive", traditional objects. Indeed, he intentionally often collected series of objects that ranged from those made of indigenous materials using traditional manufacture techniques to those which incorporated new materials, new designs and new methods of production. This allows us to reject the assertion that serious scientific collectors only paid attention to "pure" objects, uncontaminated by outside contact. We presented various examples of Modigliani's attention and collection of contaminated objects. For examples, the two different little containers for the shell powder used in Sirih consumption show different materials and manufacturing; more importantly they witness the coexistence of a traditional version made by local artisans with indigenous materials of the island, and a completely imported object. Other good examples are different styles of ornamental headbands, some made only of traditional vegetal fibers, others with insertions of beads. Finally, we highlighted that one headband is adorned with a colonial coin in sub-

stitution of the traditional shell ring, and that both versions were collected.

Regarding helms used in battle by warriors of the island, Modigliani documented and collected two forms of the artifact. One was traditionally produced with local vegetal materials, the other with metals imported and shaped with elaborated ornamental motifs.

In many cases, Modigliani documented beads, of different materials and origin, as part of exchange and elements inserted in artefacts. Beads are often currently recognized as important items and significant indicators of cultural exchanges (Ikeya, 2020). In other cases, we found that the imported object was safe kept in containers produced in Nias with local materials as the scale for gold, and the ceramic plates. We also noticed that Modigliani included in the collection the set of Chinese ceramic plates with their Nias container, but he did not include in the collection even one traditional and commonly used wooden plate for food that he described in his book. Because of our discovery that Modigliani included in his collection many objects and materials from outside, it is necessary to develop a vision of how they were integrated in the material culture of Nias. Pieter ter Keurs (2023) in his recent article "How to Deal with 'Things from Outside': an Anthropological Perspective", proposed that "When objects are transferred from one culture to another, it always involves a transformation of meaning, agency or sometimes even a change in the material" (2023: 14). To support this vision, he described rituals of Enggano, another island west of Sumatra, also visited by Modigliani, claiming that "When we deal with objects from outside we can distinguish several types of ritual surrounding them, communal and personal, large-scale and small-scale, at community or individual level, but in all cases the purpose of the ritualized acts is to revitalize and to re-balance. A new equilibrium makes it possible to continue living, in harmony with the natural, social, cultural and religious environment" (Keurs, 2023: 25).

This interpretative frame is very valuable to interpret the social life of many objects and materials coming from outside as documented by Modigliani. It explains convincingly the special meaning of the *Lodoicea Sechellarum* in Nias, and its use to make the very meaningful breastplate Calabúbo, perfectly mirroring the explanation given by Modigliani himself. It can be applied also to the role of dishes used by chiefs during ritual meeting with other guests. Even symbols of colonialism were introduced, as the coin we showed included in the headband.

CONCLUSIONS

Modigliani's books and articles, meticulously accompanied by images of the objects now in the Museum,

were fundamental for reconstructing information that has sometimes been lost in the process of cataloging and exhibiting artifacts, despite the author's evident proximity to the Society and the Museum. We observed that Modigliani's writings showed his interest in studying not only the traditional indigenous culture, but also the presence and the impact of people from Malesia, China and Europe on the island of Nias. He clearly noticed that these relations were influencing and innovating the material cultures of the island. From our study on the ethnological collection it emerges clearly that his interest for circulation of objects and materials had consequences on his collecting activity: he intentionally collected objects and materials that were "from outside" and investigated how these new elements were included and integrated in Nias material culture. The Florentine collection shows that Modigliani avidly gathered all these types of artifacts.

We showed that the formalized instructions on which Modigliani may have acted were mostly general indications focused to collect the most possible range of artefacts, without providing particular details on the selection of objects. The instructions produced in those years were the result of the positivist culture that aimed to obtain an objective psychology and not indulged in subjective speculation. The artefacts, therefore, were considered not just the product of manual skill but also the extension of cerebral activity: they were considered important as objective testimonies to be examined for understanding the psychology of different populations. Scientific paradigms and instructions of the time have certainly led Modigliani to collect artefacts as it was in use for series of zoological and botanical samples. He looked for each type of object in all its variations, to document the variability of solutions reached through materials and manufactures. This criterion was not compatible with a more traditionally antiquarian purpose. He did not go in search of those items that could best represent a long-standing tradition within the populations, but of every manufacturing solution that could be found in everyday life. He put his collected objects into their cultural context as best he could. This vision was then theorized several years later in the scientific conversations of the Society with the intervention of Paolo Mantegazza and the introduction of "metamorphic objects" (1902). Contrary to what is often thought, Mantegazza openly recognized that the scientific importance of anthropological and ethnographic studies did not consist in describing indigenous cultures intact and free of foreign elements, but, on the contrary, in investigating the effects of encounters (and clashes) on material cultures. Our research helps debunk the idea that all 19th century anthropologists were only interested in "pure" objects uncontaminated by outside contact.

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