

Elio Modigliani in Indonesia: Nineteenth century views of natives and Dutch colonizers

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ABSTRACT

Elio Modigliani (1860-1932) is often considered a paradigmatic figure of the late 19th century voyager, explorer and collector. His collections and writings also represent a connection between the Netherlands and the history of the Florentine Museum of Anthropology and Ethnology. This Museum is one of the oldest anthropology museums in the world and represents an excellent case study for many aspects of museology and decolonization. We investigate in this article the contexts in which Modigliani operated: the newborn Italian State and the Dutch territories of the Southeast colonies. The case of Modigliani adds a new dimension to the landscape of relationship between the Netherlands and Southeast Asia. Also our understanding of the social context and the cultural/political framework of Modigliani's work can add precious new meanings to interpreting his role as a scientific traveler and to contextualize his museum collections for the public.

Key words:

ethnological collecting, anthropology, decolonization, museology, positivism.

RIASSUNTO

Elio Modigliani in Indonesia: sguardi su popoli nativi e colonizzatori olandesi dell'Ottocento

Elio Modigliani (1860-1932) è considerato una figura paradigmatica di viaggiatore, esploratore e collezionista di fine Ottocento. Le sue collezioni e i suoi scritti descrivono anche un legame tra l'Olanda e la storia del Museo di Antropologia e Etnologia fiorentino. Questo Museo è uno dei più antichi musei di antropologia del mondo e rappresenta un eccellente caso di studio sotto molti aspetti legati alla museologia e alla decolonizzazione.

In questo articolo indaghiamo i contesti in cui Modigliani operava: il neonato Stato italiano e i territori olandesi delle colonie nel Sud-Est asiatico. Il caso di Modigliani può essere molto utile nell'aggiungere una nuova dimensione al panorama delle relazioni tra l'Olanda e l'Asia del Sud-Est. Inoltre la nostra comprensione del contesto sociale e dei processi politico-culturali in cui ebbe luogo il lavoro di Modigliani aggiunge preziosi nuovi significati al suo ruolo come viaggiatore scientifico e alla comunicazione delle sue collezioni museali al pubblico.

Parole chiave:

collezionismo etnologico, antropologia, decolonizzazione, museologia, positivism.

INTRODUCTION

Elio Modigliani (1860-1932) is often considered a paradigmatic figure of the late 19th century voyager, explorer and collector (fig. 1). Although his ethnological and anthropological collections are conserved at the Museum of Anthropology and Ethnology of the University of Florence, his pictures and cast plaster masks are part of the heritage of international museums. Yet, a critical international assessment of Modigliani is lacking in part because his publications are mostly in Italian and often difficult to obtain. Here we strive to provide a fuller picture of Modigliani, illustrated

by his multiple connections with the Netherlands. Modigliani is most famous for his travels to Indonesia where he had many contacts with the Netherlands. Even before his first journey he studied firsthand the collections in Netherland museums. Importantly for our purposes, he wrote extensively about his explorations, collecting, studies and encounters. In particular, Modigliani gave ample space to his relations with colonial authorities of the Netherlands. Later, he was formally recognized by the Netherlands for his contribution with an honorific title, and nominated of the Order of Orange-Nassau for his meritorious service to the Royal House. This honour was in spite



Fig. 1. Portrait of Elio Modigliani (1860-1932), albumine print, Museum of Anthropology and Ethnology, Florence, Italy.

of the fact that his relations with Dutch authorities during his field research were not always easy. Today, artifacts and pictures from Modigliani are also preserved in Dutch museums. His collections and his writings represent a connection between the Netherlands and the history of the Florentine Museum of Anthropology and Ethnology. This Museum is one of the oldest anthropology museums in the world and represents an excellent case study for many aspects of museology and decolonization.

THE MUSEUM OF FLORENCE AS A STUDY CASE

The Museum of Anthropology and Ethnology in Florence represents an emblematic case of a rich stratification of collections, contents and contexts. It was founded in 1869 as a National Museum during the time when Florence was the capital of the newborn Italian State. At that time, it included historical collections already present in Florence, foremost among these were the exotic artefacts once displayed by the Medici family.

The entire Medici dynasty was distinguished by a remarkable attention to the so-called natural productions, which various members of the family followed with a real passion. Contemporaneously, great attention was also paid to exotic artifacts that were acquired mainly from Africa and from the New World. At the end of seventeen hundreds the Medicean collections were already part of the exhibit at

La Specola Museum, the extraordinary creation of Peter Leopold I Habsburg-Lorraine the Grand Duke of Tuscany (later Leopold II, as Emperor of Austria). With *motu proprio* of 21 February 1775, the Grand Duke Peter Leopold founded the Imperial and Royal Museum of Physics and Natural History. The Museum was conceived in the context of an Enlightenment project of popular acculturation and entrusted to the direction of the scholar Felice Fontana. It was the first example of a scientific museum of natural history open to all, without limitations of origin, gender or class. The collections of naturalistic interest of Medicean origin, once dispersed in various galleries, were gathered in Palazzo Torrigiani and organized together with wide new acquisitions, according to an encyclopedic itinerary aimed at making the nature system evident. The selection of the objects and their presentation in the Museum was accurate not only for displaying the most updated scientific knowledge of the time, but also for refined aesthetic choices. The renewed building culminated with a tower expressly built to host an astronomical observatory. Florentines named the Museum La Specola after this observatory.

In this palace, minerals, botanical and zoological specimens, and detailed anatomical wax models, produced on the spot, were on display for educational purposes. The ethnological objects, from the Medicean to the more newly acquired collections, were located in the gallery of "utensili delle nazioni barbare" (utensils of barbarian nations). To these objects, individual findings and important collections were constantly added, such as items from those gathered by James Cook on his second and third trips to the Pacific (Bigoni & Barbagli, 2022).

However, the first systematic attempts in collecting and studying human material cultures developed during positivism. The nineteenth century marks the extraordinary development of the collections of the Museum of Natural History, but it also saw the loss of its unity with the creation of the Institute for Advanced Studies, which later (1924) became the University. The Museum was divided into collections attached to individual university chairs and transferred to various institutes, in different Florentine buildings.

When Florence was the capital of the newly born Italian state, Paolo Mantegazza (Monza, 1831 – Le-rici, 1910) created in this new crossroad of artists, intellectuals and scientists, the first chair of Anthropology (fig. 2). He also founded the National Museum of Anthropology and Ethnology (1869), where the ancient ethnological artefacts were relocated from La Specola. Humans, under the physical and psychological point of view, became at the same time subject and object of a new field of study: the anthropological sciences. Mantegazza was a very influential and eclectic figure of the time, known internationally and cited

by Charles Darwin and Sigmund Freud. He was a medical doctor, a traveller, a scientist, a writer of both scientific publications and popular science. He was politically active: he was first a parliamentary deputy and later senator. He also founded the Società Italiana di Antropologia e Etnologia, an institution close to the Museum and well known on the international scientific stage (Darwin and Huxley among others were honorary members). Thanks to this endeavours, Florence represented also a centre for planning scientific expeditions that brought back huge quantities of artefacts and samples, useful as research material and for exhibit in the Museum cabinets.

ELIO MODIGLIANI'S COLLECTIONS

Elio Modigliani (1860-1932) became a very young member of the Società Italiana di Antropologia e Etnologia in 1881. For his ethnological studies, Modigliani was mentored by Paolo Mantegazza and Enrico Giglioli. He also became a well appreciated collector of zoological samples, with many new species discovered, in tight collaboration with Giacomo Doria, and his Museum of Genoa. Doria (1840-1913) was a very important personality of the time that became also President of the Società Geografica Italiana (1891-1900) and had very important political roles as Mayor of Genoa and senator of the State. Modigliani's reputation and fame as a geographer, ethnographer and naturalist were primarily based on his expeditions to Nias, Sumatra, Engano and Sipòra. His ethnological collection, acquired by the Florentine Museum in two different moments, included around 2,000 objects. The first group of artefacts, all collected during the journey to Nias in 1886, was given as a gift to the Museum in 1887. During the following explorations Modigliani continued collecting even more intensively. In 1904 a second, large batch of artefacts was acquired by the Museum. This second group included, together with more objects from the previous Nias expedition, the collections from the following journeys to Sumatra Batak villages in the Toba lake region, Engano island (1891) and Sipòra island (1894) of the Mentawai Archipelago. Note that Modigliani and his contemporaries used the spelling *Mentawéi* and in the pertinent citations and references to his publications we have maintained this original spelling. Modigliani added to these collections more ethnological objects from his private collection coming from other regions (Java, China, India, Persia and even South America).

The collection also comprises an important and unique assembly of osteological remains including skulls (Danielli, 1891, 1893; Capasso & Di Tota, 1989-1990).

In the 1920s the Museum was moved from its original limited spaces of Via Capponi, to the prestigious renaissance Palazzo Nonfinito, in the heart of historical



Fig. 2. Portrait of Paolo Mantegazza (1835-1910) by Giacomo Brogi (1895 ca) (Fausto Barbagli private collection).

Florence, a few meters from the Duomo, where it is still located. The Museum experienced and illustrates many aspects of what can be thought of as the "dark trident" of fascism, colonialism and racist ideology.

In its new space the Anthropology Museum dedicated a wide space, maintained until these days, to objects brought from Indonesia to Florence by Elio Modigliani. Recent studies have highlighted interesting and innovative aspects of his approach to ethnology and to collecting (Bigoni et al., 2019a, 2019b). The Museum contains also 40 plaster cast masks made by Modigliani, which come from Engano (5), Sipòra (18) and Sumatra (17) (Dionisio et al., 2020). They were considered an important 3D documentation, in a time where measurements of people represented the basis of physical anthropology. Another significant aspect of this kind of artifacts was the possibility to produce multiple copies from the same matrix.

The anthropologist Nello Puccioni, Director of the Museum of Florence at the time of Modigliani's death, wrote a passionate necrology (Puccioni, 1932). He underlined, among a long series of achievements, that Modigliani's series of face cast masks was the first collection of this kind produced in Italy. In fact, the creation of plaster cast masks on the living, for anthropological purposes, was introduced by him and handed down to his younger Florentine colleagues. Puccioni also recalled how important Modigliani's role had been in establishing this method of research. Mantegazza himself considered the precise 3D reconstruction of human physical characteristics

a necessary anthropological tool from the start of the museum activities. Despite very poor economic resources and a limited team working with the collections, the sculptor Giuseppe Felli was hired and regularly paid. Five plaster statues produced by Felli, are part of the exhibit until today. Three of them represent real persons met by Elio Modigliani during his explorations of Indonesian islands, one from Nias and a couple (male and female) from Sipòra. Their features were shaped following face cast masks, photographs and drawings brought by Modigliani. With Modigliani the Florentine Museum became a center of production and dissemination of cast plaster masks for other European institutions, including the Netherlands. The production of this kind of masks became a more violent practice in anthropological research during fascism (Dionisio et al., 2020). We highlight these particular objects because today they can be considered a very sensitive, significant and controversial heritage, obtained in colonial contexts and expression of the disparity of power.

Modigliani extensively used photographs to document cultures and daily life of the islands inhabitants. Detailed photographic documentation was a Florentine tradition (Chiozzi, 1996). Photography became highly relevant in Florentine anthropology in part due to the influence of Paolo Mantegazza who was the founder and first president of the Italian Photographical Society. The images taken by Modigliani in his voyages to the Indonesian islands were not simply snap-shots of exotic people and places, but they put objects, clothes and ornaments, into an anthropological context. Modigliani's photographic documentation is still useful today to better understand material cultures. Recently, this utility was clearly demonstrated in the catalogue of the Tokyo University Museum "Intermédiaire", in which objects from Nias were described: "In the end of the 19th century, Italian geographer Elio Modigliani brought back from his trip photographs of a village chief from the Southern region. These help us better understand how head-dresses and ornaments were worn, and how they were combined" (Yoshiaki, 2013: 219).

The fruit of his ethnological and anthropological field work is accompanied by a rich production of articles, books and letters which are full of descriptions of the environment, encounters with island peoples and their culture. His writings represent a detailed and still refreshing documentation – rich with anecdotes and personal impressions, including information on the objects present in the collection, on their use and how they were acquired and even transported.

Despite the fact that Mantegazza's books were widely diffused in Europe and translated into several languages, we could not find translations of Modigliani or original articles in other languages other than Italian, with the exception of his article "Les boucliers

des Nias" (1889). His work was diffused in Europe especially by three articles in English (1890, 1892, 1893), two of them in "Nature". The author was Enrico Hillyer Giglioli, student of Thomas Huxley, that became a prominent zoologist, collector and a prestigious Mantegazza's collaborator in Florence: "Little more than two years ago [...] I made the remark that our young traveller had shown that he was made of the stuff of the very best of scientific explorers [...] I now have the good fortune to show further proofs that I was not mistaken in thus judging him" (1892). Even though Modigliani was an intense field worker and left an extensive, unique collection, many of his writings and the collection itself are little known outside of Italy. Nonetheless specialists of the field cited Modigliani as a fundamental source of information. Wolfgang Marschall (2002) remembers Modigliani in his study of slavery in Nias. He also underlines the importance of Modigliani's work and the fact that it is not sufficiently appreciated: "It was again the Italian naturalist Elio Modigliani, the most neglected of all earlier writers on Nias, who discovered 'sepolto negli Archivi' (buried in the Archives) and published the treaty concluded on 23 March 1693 [...]" (2002: 310). In fact, Modigliani documented extensively in his book on Nias not just his journey, but also past events and the international literature available about the regions he explored. Pieter ter Keurs (2002) claimed that the major source on traditional Enganese culture is Modigliani. Modigliani's impact on Batak culture was recognized also by Hirose (1994).

SCIENTIFIC FRAMEWORK AND PARAMETERS OF COLLECTING

One of the assumptions, which had such a grievous impact in the century to come, was the supposed parallelism between savages and primitive man. It was thought that through the study of savage peoples it was possible to reconstruct the past of European populations beginning from the ancestral stage, frozen in time of primitive man. Anthropology was woven into an evolutionary perspective that was rapidly diffusing throughout Western culture.

The writings of Lamberto Loria, an explorer close to Modigliani illustrate this point. Loria travelled extensively, spent years on the field in the Pacific, and ended up collecting materials for a museum of Italian ethnography. Both Modigliani and Loria contributed to the growth of Mantegazza's scientific society (1891) and shared a common interest in Darwinian theories. "Like most scientists of his generation, Loria was an evolutionist. He wrote [...] for instance: In the same way as one cannot study the history of Italy without being acquainted with the history of other nations, one cannot study the ethnography of Italy without being familiar with that of other peoples, whether they be civilized, semi-civilized, or savages. [...]"

Comparative ethnography, connecting our manners and customs with those of savage and semi-savage peoples, will be able to reach more general conclusions and to illustrate the genesis and phases of our own progress from time immemorial to our day" (Grottanelli, 1977: 596).

New theories were not easy to be accepted in a very Catholic country as Italy, but Mantegazza, who kept a scientific correspondence with Charles Darwin himself, was a disseminator of evolutionism (Bigoni & Defrance, 2014). The basis of anthropology and ethnology were built on this background: "Men such as these, like their contemporaries from other nations, contributed significantly to the foundations of factual anthropological knowledge of their day and, indeed, of ours. Yet none of them had, or possibly could have, received any real grounding in matters anthropological-an unavailable luxury in their youth. [...] Only Modigliani had begun his scientific career as a prehistorian" (Grottanelli, 1977: 595).

He appeared in the scientific circles as a young paleontologist studying the Bergeggi grotta in Liguria, and he devoted energies to paleontology during all his life (Modigliani, 1886, 1914).

Standards of scientific collecting, preparation and expedition were pertinent arguments of the period. Modigliani developed his scientific knowledge in connection with two first-rate institutions of the time. For zoological collections the point of reference was the Museo Civico (Civic Museum) of Genoa under the guide of Giacomo Doria. These two institutions were the guide for Modigliani's education in the field and later the destinations of his heritage, Genoa for zoological samples and Florence for ethnological and anthropological collections. It is interesting to note that part of meticulous Modigliani's preparations for his expeditions included a visit to the museums and libraries in the Netherlands (Puccioni, 1932).

In the second half of the nineteenth century due to the development of new disciplines, the paradigms of naturalistic collecting changed significantly. With the birth of biogeography, the goal was no longer the search for individual representative specimen for each species, but to collect samples from different locations to document the geographical distribution of the species and their variability. One example is the Central Collection of Italian Vertebrate Animals founded by Enrico Hillyer Giglioli, with series of dozens of specimens from all over the country (Barbagli, 2021).

Elio Modigliani applied the serial criterion also in the process of collecting artifacts to represent human cultures. In the writings of the time, we find clear reference to his series of objects. Giglioli (1890) wrote about the series of curved sword handles with handlings representing various versions of boar's head collected by Modigliani in Nias. In 1892, Giglioli mentioned again Modigliani's ability in documenting the material cultures with series of artifacts, and



Fig. 3. Examples of serial criterion in collecting:

Giglioli's birds and Modigliani's *Pustaha*.

From the exhibition "Natura Collecta, Natura exhibita", Firenze 2019-2022 (Photo S. Bambi).

highlighted the mysterious and fascinating series of 20 *pustaha*, magic books recording esoteric knowledge, made of tree bark and wood by Batak culture, collected in North Sumatra (fig. 3). Almost a century later, they were studied in Florence by Peter Voorhoeve (1979-1980).

CULTURAL AND POLITICAL PANORAMA IN THE NEW-BORN ITALIAN STATE

In a time when the Netherlands were already a powerful and rich colonial nation, Italy had recently unified and was going through multiple difficulties: "Indeed, in the crucial central decades of the 19th century, when anthropological studies were gradually emerging from the sphere of literary curiosity to the dignity of the fully scientific discipline, Italy's intellectual life was seriously handicapped. The energies of her educated classes were absorbed in the task of ensuring the country's political independence and unity, and once these goals were attained (1861, proclamation of the kingdom of Italy; 1870, occupation of Rome) they were concerned with that of providing the young state with uniform laws and structures after centuries of division" (Grottanelli, 1977: 594). It is commonly believed that Modigliani was a traveller pushed only by his passion for discovery and completely alien from economic and political aims (Puccini, 1988). Paolo Mantegazza claimed publicly that science and politics should be totally sepa-

rated. However, since its inception, anthropology in Italy was closely linked to politics, starting from Mantegazza himself, who often overlapped political views and scientific dissemination. His Florentine society developed inside a network of connections with influential members of government.

The new Italian State had to define its identity. Italy had become a political union under the Savoia Royal family, but to realize a complete union at the cultural and social level remained an enormous task. In fact, Italy put together a patchwork of historically diverse regions. Even language was an obstacle. Dialects were so diverse that they were often incomprehensible. The study of other peoples by anthropologists should be seen in this historical framework. Creating the image of the "others" through anthropology and ethnology could have a determinant role in defining what was Italian. An important consequence of this historical moment was the search for commercial treaties and ultimately for colonial territories, trying to follow what the other European countries had successfully achieved. Italy became the last European state to acquire territorial possessions overseas. In 1885 a first settlement was acquired in Africa on the Red Sea coast (later Eritrea). But initially the interest focused on East and southeast regions, focusing on the few territories still "available" in Asia (Pelaggi, 2019). This fact, very much removed from Italian historical memories, was recently studied by a number of different scholars. In China this search was finalized with the Concession of Tianjin documented in his ambiguities by Marinelli (2012) in an article posing the significant question: Little Italy or colonial space? Also Coco (2017) has investigated the history of Taijin and the controversial meaning of the term concession and its forgotten colonial connotation (Coco, 2017: 10).

Recently Di Meo highlighted that: "In the second half of the nineteenth century, Southeast Asia was the subject of numerous explorations set up by the Kingdom of Italy, promoted by the executives chaired by Luigi Federico Menabrea (1865-69) and aimed at the occupation of a territory to be used as a penal colony (Novero, 2011), or to commercial outpost; the Piedmontese adventurer Celso Cesare Moreno proposed to the Italian government the conferral of the protectorate over the sultanate of Aceh, on the island of Sumatra, while Giovanni Emilio Cerruti, director of a trading house in Ningpo, China, scoured the Moluccas and Papua New Guinea. Finally, Admiral Carlo Alberto Racchia started a series of negotiations with the British government to obtain a territorial concession in Borneo, arousing the grievances of the Dutch government, which controlled much of the Indo-Malay Archipelago, and did not tolerate the interference of Italian explorers" (Di Meo, 2020: 76). It would be naive not consider that Italian explorers of the time had a very pragmatic approach to their

task and were well aware of the political utility of ethnological knowledge.

Odoardo Beccari, a forerunner of the exploration of South Asia

Odoardo Beccari (1843-1920) was a naturalist from Florence who arrived with Giacomo Doria in Borneo where conducted researches and collected samples and artifacts till 1868.

Beccari published an Italian report on this exploration in 1902, almost 40 years later. The book became an international best seller in the English translation made by Enrico Giglioli, published in 1904 with the title "Wanderings in the Great Forests of Borneo".

The Preface made no mystery of Beccari's political connections and sympathies: "This is the kingdom of Sarawak, which owes its origin to a man of great gifts and a born lover of adventure, Mr., after Rajah Sir James Brooke, whose nephew and successor, Sir Charles Brooke, the second European Rajah, now governs with a spirit of the truest philanthropy, leading his subjects rapidly along the pass of progress towards civilization".

Interestingly, the original Italian version opens the narrative with different contents, that were cut in the English version: the author compares the English colonial authorities and in particular Sir James Brooke, bearer of a "noble civilizing mission", with the Dutch "who were and in part still are, the most ferocious monopolists in the world [...] They were such despots that not only was it forbidden to sell and export a single piece of cinnamon, but it was not even permitted, under pain of death, to destroy or damage a plant" (Beccari, 1902: 10).

Ethnography as an Instrument of Internal and Colonial Policy

It is important to cite again an Italian traveler and ethnographer very close to Modigliani and from the same generation: Lamberto Loria (Alessandria d'Egitto, 1855 - Roma, 1913). He is well remembered for his explorations of Papua New Guinea and as the founder of the Italian Society of Ethnography (1910). Here we need to highlight his perspective about colonialism: "In his enthusiasm, Loria did not overlook the practical uses of the studies he was advocating. In a short paper published [...] under the significant title 'Ethnography as an Instrument of Internal and Colonial Policy', he wrote: 'If the knowledge of the manners and customs of the peoples subjected to a civilized nation assists the latter in preserving its rule, all the more so will the knowledge of manners and customs of our own people render unexpected services to our nation'" (Grottanelli, 1977: 596).

It is important for us to add that in this same article Loria gave an explicatory example that sounds shocking today: "The administration of justice re-

minds me of an anecdote from my life as a traveler. I was with a government official in the northeastern tip of Papua when a native asked me if it was true that the government official's father was dead, and in response I clubbed the native. And note that it is strictly forbidden to mistreat the Papuans: yet I did this in the presence of the official who could also arrest and punish me. I remember, as if it were now, the amazed face of the Englishman when, in explanation of my act, I told him that the native could not have offended the majesty of the law more strongly than by asking me news of his dead father; for no Papuan of that region would dare to do this to any of his fellows" (Loria, 1912: 77).

Expeditions in faraway territories, opening of new commercial roads, colonial ambitions and patriotic values were tightly connected. Institutions as the Società Geografica Italiana were expressions of these aspirations and directly involved in this process. While Modigliani was certainly less "political" than many of his colleagues, he shared the values of his fellow scientists and explorers. Modigliani himself presented the results of his explorations in official events at the presence of institutional figures and members of the Royal Family. Famous his speech on his experience among the Independent Batak of Sumatra, organized in Rome by the Società Geografica Italiana, at the presence of King Umberto and Queen Margherita (Puccioni, 1932).

ADVENTURES IN THE COLONIES OF "OTHERS"

Journey to Nias

The most celebrated and ponderous book written by Modigliani is "Un viaggio a Nias", a detailed narrative of his journey in Nias island. Most of the "Ringraziamenti" (acknowledgments) dated "Firenze, 7 novembre 1889", that open the book, are addressed to Dutch personalities: "Long historical research and patient ethnographic comparisons allowed me to gather the material contained in these pages, and I certainly would not have been able to complete them without the valid and courteous help of the gentlemen: H. van der Wijk, Secretary General of the Dutch Colonies Ministry; T. H. F. Riemsdijk, Director of the Royal Archives of Holland; Th. Ch. Wijnmalen, Secretary of the Royal Institute of the Dutch Indies; L. Serrurier and D. E. Schmeltz, Director and Curator of the R. Ethnographic Museum of Leiden; W. N. du Rieu, Director of the Leiden Library; M. Pleyte and Heger, Directors of the Ethnographic Museums of Amsterdam".

There are four dense pages of bibliography, many were international publications and most of references were by Dutch authors. Also the note about illustrations refers in part to Dutch sources: "The

figures are all original, almost all drawn on the objects themselves brought by the author, some (59, 73, 74, 88, 91, 96, 97, 100, 108, 131, 147, 148, 168, 170) on objects of the Leiden Museum. [...] The phototypical plates are taken from original photographs of the author, except for the numbers III, X, XIX, XX, reproduced from photographs (unknown author but probably made by some Dutch officer during one of the various war expeditions sent in 'island'), which were kindly lent by the publisher Busy of Amsterdam".

Beside books and articles, Modigliani used to write letters during his journeys, with information about his discoveries. They were not private communications, but written for a wide audience and published. A good example is the letter addressed to the scholar Issel from Nias (April 26, 1886, published in 1887). In this letter Modigliani clearly expressed the importance to collect information to promote Italian commerce: "The coffee trade, like that of salt and opium, is a monopoly of the Government in Sumatra, which portrays the advantage that it cannot derive from taxes. Such a sale is advantageous for both parties [...] A trade that Italy should have already started in Sumatra is that of the sarong; this is how certain pieces of brightly colored cotton cloth are called, 2 m long and 1 m high. that the natives use in various ways [...]. Some sorts of very fine sarongs are made in the village; but for the most part they are shipped from Holland, Switzerland or Germany. In Italy certain fabric factories that cannot find their products on the market could perhaps try to make a sarong with advantage, obviously adapting the designs according to the taste of the natives and thus giving rise to an active trade. Unfortunately, the name of our homeland is ignored here and it helps that nothing is neglected to make it well-known".

In the same letter he recounts the steps preceding his arrival in Nias, with references to the military difficulties of the Dutch in maintaining control over various territories of those colonies. He also describes his first encounter with the Batak: "In the few days I spent in Siboga, the only ones who used me ease and courtesy, not talking about Europeans, were the Bataks. They brought me insects and snakes for my collections, they sold me eggs and chickens at a fair price; one of their leaders took me to hunt monkeys and hosted me at night in his house, so that early in the morning I could find myself in the right place; also he gave me a musical instrument [...] On the whole they made a very good impression on me, but I know that those of the interior are much more proud and that the custom of eating prisoners of war reigns among them. They are rather small, well proportioned [...]" (Modigliani, 1887: 5).

His interest in the Bataks will later become a source of friction with Dutch authorities: the subsequent scientific expedition to the territories of Sumatra,

where the military control was weaker, showed more complex and multifaceted aspects of his relation with the colonial power.

Among the Independent Bataks

Modigliani dedicated his second journey to Sumatra, and specifically to the Toba region, where Dutch authorities had apparently could not submit the proud local population of Bataks. Hirosue (1988) wrote about the connection that Modigliani developed with a Batak charismatic leader: "Somalaing came to believe that this Italian was sent to Toba in order to help him. Modigliani was eager to travel the upper Asahan area, although the Controleur of Toba did not allow him to go there because it was not under Dutch rule. Having been permitted to by the Governor-General travel anywhere in Sumatra except Aceh, the Italian was indignant with this attitude by the local officials in Tapanuli. He decided to visit the independent area secretly. He then implored Somalaing, who was well-known among the people, to guide him to that area" (1988: 96-97).

The bond between Modigliani and Somalaing is evident from the book that Modigliani wrote about his journey in Sumatra. Hirosue describes an element that apparently connected the two men: "Somalaing had found what he was looking for a European dissatisfied with the Dutch. He therefore became extremely excited by Modigliani's offer. From 19 December 1890 till 24 January 1891, Somalaing and Modigliani travelled the north-eastern part of Toba and Asahan. Following the guidance of Somalaing, Modigliani went through Narumonda to Tanjong Balai (the capital of Asahan) along the Asahan River and came back through the north-eastern part of Habinsaran to Balige. Satisfied with the results, Modigliani left Toba in April 1891" (1988: 98).

Modigliani left a detailed report of his explorations and encounters in the region publishing the book "Fra i Batacchi Indipendenti" (1892), where he shows openly his interest and admiration for these natives and their culture. Regarding the conclusions of this mission, Modigliani wrote a different story: the truth is that he was quite unwilling to leave those territories, but there were unsolvable difficulties with Dutch authorities. He kept on writing about his problems with the Dutch in his next book.

The Women island, the journey to Engano: a pleasant tale?

The crucial point in relations with the Dutch authorities is reported in this book, published by Modigliani in 1891 and republished in Italian in 1993. In the reprint the back cover presents the book as a "pleasant tale" (un piacevole racconto). It is the last book written by Modigliani who subsequently limited himself to publishing articles in various Italian journals. We translate here a citation that well express the tension

between Modigliani and the "Controleur" of Toba (Modigliani explains in a note that "The degree of Controleur is the last in the colonial administrative offices. Not knowing an equivalent in Italian, I keep the Dutch form"): "I was almost in the center of Sumatra, camping in the Si Rambè forest. 'Wake up, master, there is a letter'. The letter was sent to me by Mr. Controleur of Toba from Lagubóti where he resides [...] The Controleur wrote to me that his superior, the Resident of Padang Sidempuán, announced the following to him: 'Please inform Mr. Modigliani that it is the last time that H.E. the Governor warns him not to travel beyond the limits of the territory subject to the Government and that if Mr. Modigliani still travels nevertheless in the independent regions, the governor will let him know of the power he has at his disposal and will remove the permission already given to him to travel also in other parts of Sumatra. I was then returning from a long excursion among the independent Batacchi, carried out secretly to the government authorities, having availed myself of the help of leaders unwilling to obey and exalted by having discovered the great waterfall of Sapurán Si Arímo which collects the water that comes out of Lake Toba, from having reached the eastern coast of the island after having left the western one and having visited many districts, shortly before rebelling against colonial power, I was preparing for new excursions completely neglecting government prohibitions. Naturally in Padang and in Batavia they were indignant against me, and this letter was the end of many incidents that I have narrated in another book'" (1894: 1-2).

The Dutch authorities proposed a compromise offering the possibility to visit Engano island, that Modigliani accepted. His book "Viaggio ad Engano" is a very eloquent report on the difficulties endured by the population of the island.

Far from the limits of a pleasant tale, the book is also an honest report on the situation he finds on the island: Modigliani does not spare dramatic descriptions of natives conditions. His view of the decline of the population is vivid "This village, in which I lived for a month and a half, was very miserable; twelve people lived there which must have been the remnants of a major tribe because it was understood from the ruined houses that once the inhabitants of that place must have been many more" (1894: 109).

We will not find in Modigliani's reports an open denounce of the violent European impact. He gives us a huge amount of information about the past history of the territories, the contemporary condition of population, the laws implemented by Dutch authorities, letting us the task to fill in the blanks.

For example, he speaks openly about illnesses introduced by Europeans, as syphilis, a dramatic plague widespread in the 50 years previous his arrival (1894: 141). The timing coincides with his account of con-

tacts with foreigners at the end of 1840s through the increase of trading and contacts with French (1894: 63). The original publication includes also an eloquent photograph of a woman, her naked body completely devastated by leprosy (Tav. X), a picture omitted in the reprint of 1993. After all his descriptions, the expression of "provvido governo coloniale" (provident colonial govern) referred to the Dutch management of local wood commerce, sounds to us almost sarcastic (1894: 106).

On the political and economic point of view it is interesting to point out that a table on customs duties for imports to Siboga was included in the book (1993: 14). It should not be forgotten that many expeditions classified as scientific by the post-unification Italian government concealed undeclared commercial and colonial interests. The Italian and Dutch interests for those territories found themselves in conflict due to the Italian aims on those territories. Between 1868 and 1871 two Italian missions took place in the Indonesian area, aimed at establishing a penal colony, a project that failed due to the opposition of the Netherlands and the lack of approval from Great Britain. This may explain the difficult relations between Modigliani and the Dutch colonial authority during his travels as a consequence of uncertain international balance.

Mentawéi islands: the last journey

The "Gazzetta Ufficiale del Regno d'Italia del 23 ottobre 1894", under the title "L'esploratore E. Modigliani", informed that: "The president of the Italian Geographic Society, Hon. Senator Marquis G. Doria, has news from Pedang (Island of Sumatra) about the exploration undertaken by Dr. E. Modigliani to the Mentawéi Islands, Dutch colonies. The expedition was completed in the midst of difficulties of all kinds after having lost many men, perished in the struggles against the natives and due to the attacks of malaria fevers. But the result of the trip is excellent: zoological and ethnographic collections, geographical notes, numerous photographs will be able, when ordered and study, offer material to an interesting book, which will greatly increase our knowledge of those islands". In the last paragraph, it was also communicated that "Dr. Modigliani arrived in Genoa on the 17th in good health" (AA.VV., 1894: 5139).

This "official" version does not mirror the reality of the situation. It had been a long fieldwork of 8 months, certainly a considerable time, but he gave up on the planned mission to another Mentawéi island, Siberut, because he fell seriously ill, risking his life. In fact, it took Modigliani more than one year to recover and his health remained so compromised that he could not engage in other trips to the "East Indies". With the expedition to the Mentawéi islands, interrupted earlier than Modigliani had planned, his activities as a traveler ended. On his return from the

Mentawéi Islands he was only 34 years old and had already a great reputation thanks to his travels. His publications were considered a model for scientific monographies of field studies, but he never wrote a book on this last experience. He left some articles, the last of them written and published many years later (1894, 1898, 1910, 1930-1931). The "Appunti etnologici su Sipòra" were in fact published less than two years before his death. Modigliani himself wrote: "I improved in health and repatriated, but disheartened for not having been able to fulfill my program, sure as I was that the island of Siberut represented the first step taken by those who populated the small archipelago, I did not publish the observations made in Sipòra" (1930-1931: 30).

Two Felli's statues of the three already mentioned reproduce inhabitants of Sipòra (a male and a female entire figure), complete with facial and body tattoos. Modigliani was interested in the practice of tattoos from the ethnological point of view and had collected the equipment used for this practice by the natives. The interest in tattoos is also demonstrated by the reproduction of these signs of which he had tried to grasp the meanings and symbolisms, on the two plaster statues. He wrote an article on the subject (1910) discussing what had been published about Mentawéi tattoos on the international literature, showing that he kept reading on the subject. He also wrote that a tattoo on his hand, made in the island to become part of the native community, was the cause of his illness.

Included among the most important geographers of his time by Bertacchi (1929), celebrated for his adventures and his ability as writer, his collections became the material for a great number of studies by specialists in the fields of physical anthropology, zoology and botany of his times. He preferred to study and write about the ethnological aspects of material cultures. He remained very active in the Italian Society of Anthropology and Ethnology, where he became President for the rest of the mandate at Mantegazza's death (1910). In the new century he went back to his first passion, paleontology, and was among the founders and the President of the Comitato di paleontologia umana, a new Florentine institution born in the context of the Italian Society (Modigliani, 1914).

CONCLUSIONS

Museum collections of all types are a powerful tool to deepen our knowledge and to communicate with a wide public. Anthropological and ethnological museums are especially sensitive and influential institutions full of political and social implications. In particular, Dutch scholars were among the forerunners in Europe to work on "colonial recollections". They recognized the important need to confront this

problem in order to widen perspectives (Dragojlovic et. al., 2014; Bloembergen & Kuitenbrouwer, 2013). These kinds of investigations should include not only the Netherlands and their former colonial territories, but also other international points of view.

The case of Modigliani can be very useful to add a new dimension to the landscape of relationship between the Netherlands and Southeast Asia. Also our understanding of the social context and the cultural/political framework within which Modigliani's work took place can form additional new meanings to interpreting collections. There are numerous, easy stereotypes clouding our image of Modigliani. The risk is in fact to flatten Modigliani's narratives to an imaginary impoverished bi-dimensional adventure in the land of "savage head-hunters".

Furthermore, the imaginary of Modigliani as a "disinterested explorer par excellence, free from political and economic conditioning [...] driven to travel for reasons that are partly scientific and partly personal, deeply emotional" as suggested by Puccini (1988: 26), should be reviewed in the context of the intricate contemporary political framework, which saw opposing Italian and Dutch interests in the territories covered by his travels. Elio Modigliani was a complex, open-minded, pragmatic individual. In his encounters with natives, he could not and did not rely on military force, but used empathy, sense of humor, and his ability to adapt to circumstances. Yet we must not forget that he was also a European traveler of his age, with a baggage of ethnocentrism and prejudices. At the same time, it is not easy to define his relationships with Dutch authorities: the ambivalences of his contact with the colonial system shine clearly through his books. Elio Modigliani was certainly known by his Dutch contemporaries (Vergouwen, 1932, from Hirosue, 1994), we hope that this paper is a beginning of a useful, contemporary, shared interpretation of his heritage. From the methodological point of view, we need to emphasize the importance of rely on the original publications. These research highlights like later versions tend to edulcorate reports, and in some way to overshadow the real intentions of the author.

Certainly, there are other important aspects of Modigliani's collection to more deeply explore. For example, given their unique importance and diversity, both the facial masks and human remains, deserve special attention especially in regards to their sensibility and the delicate ethical questions that surround them.

Another fundamental point is that, much too often, the colonial problems of Italian collections are exclusively considered as linked to African collections made during the fascist era. Discussions of decolonization need to avoid such simplifications and stereotypes. Decolonization of museum collections needs to proceed in a perspective that avoids reductionism

to a single, unfortunate period. The arc of Italian colonialism and thinking can only be understood within a wider cultural and historical perspective taking into consideration the whole of international relations. The pre-fascist collections of Modigliani found in the Florentine Museum of Anthropology and Ethnology represent a case study, which illuminates many aspects of such research questions.

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