



Spring 2024

## Presentation of Culture: Framing History in US and Italian Museums

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## Presentation of Culture: Framing History in US and Italian Museums

### Abstract

National legacies drastically impact museum work and archaeological ethical practices in the US and Italy. My research question asks, to what extent and how are ethical considerations of museum professionals shaped by nationalism and evolving perceptions of how museums should serve the public in these two different national contexts? Data collected from semi-structured interviews with academics in the field reflects that museums must be transparent about the history of the topics exhibited and their methodological practices; this is supported by many findings suggested in previous scholarship (Garofan 2001; Gazi 2014; Falcucci 2021). Particular moments in US and Italian national histories, specifically the periods of settler colonialism in the US and Fascism in Italy, must be understood and discussed in museum institutions so that the public can properly reflect on the ghosts of colonialism and Fascism to create more accurate, representative, and recontextualized spaces.

### Keywords

museums, colonialism, museum ethics, Italian political history, US political history

### Disciplines

Museum Studies | Public History

### Comments

Written for ANTH 400: Capstone Experience in Anthropology

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Gettysburg College

ANTH 400: Capstone Experience

**Presentation of Culture:**  
**Framing History in US and Italian Museums**

Honors Thesis

Submitted By:

Fiona Cheyney

Due Date:

May 5, 2024

*I affirm that I have upheld the highest principles of honesty and integrity in my academic work and have not witnessed a violation of the Honor Code.*

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## I. Introduction

In this decolonial moment, the United States is tasked with reckoning with the past and collective memories, but do other nations sense this imperative? As institutions of public history and education, museums must take on part of this responsibility to properly present the past (Garoian 2001; Gazi 2014; Von Oswald and Tinius 2020). It is valuable to analyze the similarities and differences between museological practices in the United States and Italy because it is not often investigated. My research question asks, *how are ethical considerations of museum professionals shaped by nationalism and evolving perceptions of how museums should serve the public in two different contexts?* I use the United States (US) and Italy as case studies to compare and analyze this question. These two countries have complicated and quite different histories, namely with settler colonialism in the US and the Fascist Era in Italy. I aim to see how these varied pasts impact their current methodological choices in field sites and museums with archaeological collections, as well as how these presentations impact public perceptions of history.

This research presents scholarly and newspaper-based literature on the national histories of the US and Italy and highlights how museums are manifestations of their differences through the material record. I begin by synthesizing the findings from previous scholarship on ethics in archaeology and museum studies in the US and Italy, including, literature examining public perceptions of museums and archaeological practices. To build upon this, I conducted semi-structured interviews with museum professionals and scholars in the US and Italy. The various perspectives from my interviews reflect the different considerations in museum work in the two national contexts.

I compiled the interview data into major themes, some of which revealed similar patterns between the US and Italy; however, some were different. I believe the different patterns are the manifestation, and reflection, of the countries' unique national legacies. The first major finding is called 'Repercussions and Recontextualization' and suggests that the interviewees find their roles in the field important for sharing accurate, contextualized information with the public effectively and ethically. The second theme, 'Competence and Care,' reflects the importance of detailed work in the fields of archaeology and museum studies. The third section titled 'Bureaucracy and Budgets' highlights a key pattern that posits that museums have institutional limitations that must be addressed in the museum world to continue providing ethical exhibitions to the public.

I conclude that national legacies drastically impact museum work and archaeological ethical practices in the US and Italy. I argue that museums must be transparent about the history of the topics exhibited and their methodological practices which is supported by many of the findings suggested in previous scholarship (Garoian 2001; Gazi 2014; Falcucci 2021). Particular moments in US and Italian national histories, specifically the periods of settler colonialism in the US and Fascism in Italy, must be understood and discussed in museum institutions so that the public can properly reflect on the ghosts of colonialism and Fascism to create more accurate, representative, and recontextualized spaces.

## II. History of Western Museums

Museums are meant to serve an educational purpose for the public; therefore, they all implicitly have agendas. Nationalist agendas within museum institutions are often supported by propaganda. Investigating the historical background of Western museums and nationalism in the

US and Italy sets the stage for a greater conversation about ethics and practice, as well as the broad implications of imperialism.

Often thought of as the origins of Western museums, museums in Italy started during the long King-Pope era of Rome when previously private collections of “exotic items from abroad” took on a different role. Clement XII opened the Capitoline Museum in 1734 to “teach scholars and artists on the one hand, and [for] public enjoyment on the other” (Kimmelman 2008). This spread information about the history and cultures of the region rather than as hoards for private collections in the name of displaying worldliness and wealth. However, many museums still house items from antiquity so, finding accurate data on their provenances still proves to be difficult.

Museums are inherently a Western rationale; to deconstruct what has been done in the past, museum ethics must change to include non-Western productions of knowledge through decolonial thinking and the rejection of the white male bias (Garoian 2001; Gazi 2014; Von Oswald and Tinius 2020). Gaorian (2001) argues that the concept of “performing the museum” is a “pedagogical strategy that critiques the exclusivity of the Enlightenment mindset in order to create an open discourse between museum culture and viewers” (2001, 237). Similarly, Latham and Simmons (2019) argue that museology is a better term to define museum studies and should aim to reinterpret “content to analyze and disseminate information in different ways” (2019, 111). The public would benefit from reshaping museum institutions to include more diverse voices and different exhibition styles, rather than reifying the imperial mentality of museums from the past (Von Oswald and Tinius 2020).

The lack of consequential reinforcement power in regulatory bodies or in the policing of museums concerns Gazi (2014) who examines the complicated nature of museums, arguing that

ethics are seen as “a set of guiding principles of good practice that museum professionals are advised to adopt in their various activities,” but do not have enforcement power” (2014, 1). Rather, they are ideals to help professionals “judge existing practices, discourage wrongdoing, and make decisions” (Gazi 2014, 1). In other words, museum ethics are about moral accountability to the stakeholders and the communities that the museums serve. Without any negative consequences for missteps, it is imperative that museum professionals feel a sense of obligation and duty to act ethically in the presentation of collections, as well as vow to work collaboratively with local stakeholders.

#### A. US Museums & Native Americans

Museums and archaeological heritage in the US are created and maintained through complex systems of legal policies and social protections. In particular, Roosevelt’s Conservationist Antiquities Act, FDR’s New Deal, Historic Preservation Act, and the Native American Graves Protection and Repatriation Act (NAGPRA), as well as the international UNESCO National Cultural Heritage Laws, impact the ways archaeological heritage sites and museums are maintained and managed (McManamon 2001; Meskell 2018). Thus, the US has had expansive growth in infrastructure around cultural heritage sites.

In terms of social protections, the history of settler colonialism in the US has set a precedent for archaeological collections in museum spaces to marginalize disadvantaged groups, specifically Native Americans. Settler colonialism refers to the migration of a mass of people onto land with the intent to build their lives there, typically supported by wealthy governments. Settler colonial theory suggests through colonialism, the settlers’ psyches are changed, and exacerbate the liminality of the indigenous experience. Litt (2023) shows “how settler nationalists’ imagining of nation has had detrimental consequences for Indigenous peoples. This



symbolic form of colonization is layered onto material colonization, exacerbating Indigenous marginalization” (2023, 438). This theory in the context of US colonialism shows how the creation of the nation-state and nationalism can negatively impact indigenous people which inevitably became translated into museum presentations.

A leading scholar who theorizes about identity, community, and nation, Anderson’s (1983) work can be used to understand the development of an American national identity. Weiser (2009) uses the imagined community concept from Anderson (1983) to explain how some US museum institutions are unsuccessful in painting history accurately, without bias in the presentation style. The use of exhibition space was very important to her work, and she concludes that “Americans do not really know how to place the Native American story within the American narrative—a narrative of diversity becoming unity through successful communal struggle—when the facts indicate that the struggle of Indians was not for a more perfect insider status but for their own autonomy” (Weiser 2009, 32). Colonialism in the US resulted in the genocide of an insurmountable number of indigenous groups in North America which has disastrous impacts on native cultural preservation and on how current research is conducted.

Because of the problematic nature of non-indigenous-led archaeological excavations in North America, many current archaeology practices are not only meant for cultural research, it is salvage archaeology; “80–90 % are the figures typically quoted—is within commercial consultant or contract forms of practice, often referred to as cultural resource management (CRM), or more specifically, archaeological resource management” (Ferris and Welsh 2015, 74). This is specifically interesting compared to Italy, where more resources are devoted to researching past cultures.

## B. Italian Museums & 20<sup>th</sup> Century Nation-Building

Colonial projects by Italian Fascist dictator Benito Mussolini in Africa in the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century necessitated the growth of considerations in the Italian museum world. In the name of imperialism and nationalism, he created museums to present artifacts and stolen items from other cultures (Falcucci 2021, 21). McFeaters (2007) writes, “To increase nationalism and gain support for the Fascist party, Mussolini felt resurrecting ancient Rome would be an excellent means of achieving power” (2007, 53). To bring about feelings of honor and pride seen in the Roman Empire, Mussolini used propaganda and archaeology to increase patriotism. This phenomenon, of using museums for nationalistic agendas, is not unique to Italy, as shown in how the US shapes the public engagement with history.

Propaganda created by Mussolini’s regime attempted to bring back the glory of ancient Rome. The word *Fascist* is derived from *fasces* which means bundles of birch or elm rods with an axe on one end. Previously, they had represented “the power the magistrate had in ancient Rome to decapitate and scourge, while also serving as the symbol of official authority” and Mussolini wanted to develop Italian citizens around this supposed ideal (McFeaters 2007, 53). This iconography was seen all through Rome, especially at the center of Mussolini’s regime, carved into architecture at Piazza Venezia.

Along with excavations, Mussolini’s influence can be seen in monumental structures. Mussolini was cited as a “true author of modern Rome” because of his large influence over the current urban plan and the archaeological and excavation landscapes (Shaw 2004, 1). The creation of the via dei Fori Imperiali, previously known as the via dell’Impero, was built by Mussolini’s regime (McFeaters 2007). The road represented a symbolic link between antiquity and modern Rome, connecting the Colosseum down the row of Imperial Forums and to his

Piazza Venezia. To complete this, he implemented his sventramenti project which displaced thousands of people (McFeaters 2007). Much of Medieval Rome was destroyed or covered up by his work. Whether Italians like to admit it or not, the current renamed road, via dei Fori Imperiali was only possible due to Mussolini's destruction which impacts the presentation of the past, seen in Rome today.

Many wonders found within the Imperial Forums were only uncovered and researched through the excavations overseen by Mussolini and his team of archaeologists (McFeaters 2007). Archaeological reconstructions were also completed in this era, easily recognizable by red stone brick features added throughout the city of Rome (Turro 2012). To further connect himself to Ancient Rome, Mussolini had monuments built, like the Palazzo della Civilita del Lavoro also known as the Square Colosseum, that featured elements that connect back to Ancient Rome; this is specifically seen in the typography choices in the inscriptions (Shaw 2004). Monumental propaganda and excavations by Mussolini's regime increased internal tourism in Italy which expanded the nationalistic sentiments and patriotic expression. Mussolini mobilized archaeology to create and strengthen nationalism for the Fascist era and to emulate tenents of Ancient Rome.

However, Shaw (2004) and many scholars alike argue, "Much of modern Rome was shaped by the Fascists of the 1920s and '30s, but many tourists on their way to the Colosseum fail to see the remnants of *la voce d'Italia*" (2004, 1). The negative memory of Mussolini is felt so strongly in Rome that it is often covered up or removed like most of the fasces and iconography (Turro 2012). Piazza Venezia, once a meeting space for his followers, now is overtaken by cars and new roads. It begs academics to ask whether the cover-ups are part of the healing process or whether they are band-aids to conceal trauma from the past. This historical review shows that the development and use of museums in Italy and the US both serve

nationalistic purposes and have lasting consequences, as illustrated in the literature that follows and engages with the ethical considerations based on the two national contexts.

### III. National Contexts, Ethics, and Perceptions of History

Numerous scholars have considered the ethical considerations of US archaeological collections and museum work practices (Garoian 2001; Gazi 2014; Latham and Simmons 2019; Von Oswald and Tinius 2020; Swan and Jordan 2015). The same can be said for Italian sites, specifically Roman ones (Giorgio et al. 2021; Falcucci 2021; Storchi 2019; Violi 2012). I aim to provide an analysis of similarities and differences between US and Italian museum work, heritage studies, and archaeology. I synthesize literature and hypothesize an explanation as to why the methodologies differ, and then address the implications they have for the presentation of history, and the resulting public memory.

The ethical choices about the proper presentation of material culture in the US have shifted in this decolonial moment. Anthropologists, archaeologists, and museum professionals in the US are tasked with managing the public's perception of their discipline. Anthropology is “associated with colonial complicity and the problematic invention of human difference, *as well as* with post-colonial reckonings and the critical nuancing of how human difference is constituted and mobilized” (Von Oswald and Tinius 2020, 21)[italics added for emphasis]. This acknowledgment holds a lot of weight, power, and responsibility for the professionals. Anthropology becomes an inherently political project where thought processes are challenged through decolonial lenses. This can create ethical concerns for those who do not view museums as platforms for advocacy.

Due to the settler colonial past of the US, museum ethics can look different compared to other parts of the world without the same history. In the US, not all museums are national

projects, while most in Italy are. In the US, private industries can abide by their own codes of conduct. Collaborative work with indigenous people is a growing priority in US museums. Through research at the Sam Noble Museum, the Kiowa Black Leggings Warrior Society and museum professionals have collaborated to create mutually beneficial programs. As described in their research, Swan and Jordan (2015) advocate for the “importance of community heritage agendas in museum programming and the necessity of accepting the authority of communities to regulate access, use, and dissemination of intellectual property and intangible heritage” (2015, 40). The Kiowa Black Leggings Warrior Society is a great model of what ethical collaborative work can look like in shared systems of authority, despite historical colonialism. The ethical issues in US museums reflect a focus on maintaining educational accuracy, reducing complacency with older methodologies or responsibilities, and promoting collaborative work.

Like many nationalities, Americans have complex relationships with their history. National museums in the US cover many topics and are popular internal tourist destinations, which suggests that the work of museums is valued (Weiser 2009). The presentation of history through museum institutions shapes how the public interacts with the past. Colonialism is often misrepresented in education to downplay the negative aspects of the American government. Only recently has there been a rally for the “responsibility to acknowledge the legacy of colonialism and otherwise confront and work to rectify the inequalities stemming from historical consequences and policies that have separated indigenous peoples from their heritage” (Nicholas 2014, 149). Scholars like Nicholas (2014) ask how this can be done through archaeology and museums to create a connection to identity and land, whether nationalistic or not.

Public perceptions of archaeology and museum collections are shaped through nationalism. A study presented by the Archaeological Institute of America (2023) found that

64% of Americans surveyed thought that preserving archaeological sites should be a priority of the US government. 80% of respondents thought that the US should increase the land associated with archaeological sites as protected territory, reflecting a prioritization of decolonial processes. Further, 40% of those surveyed thought that archaeology is important for the economy, as heritage tourism boosts local economies, as reflected in Weiser (2009) (IPSOS for the Society for American Archaeology 2023).

In addition, the increased use of the internet for education has sparked interest in the merging of archaeological and digital scholarship, as seen in the Levi Jordan Plantation site that addresses a site of slavery in the US (McDavid 2002). This example shows the possibilities for greater public involvement and interest in otherwise inaccessible knowledge and sites. Pride of country can be muddied because of the complex past of the US and the land it calls home. The prioritization of indigenous or stakeholder-focused archaeology is not seen in Italy because different national histories impacted their archaeological landscape

In the Italian archaeological sphere of museums and parks, the state is the only manager of cultural heritage sites. Overall, two of the largest concerns are the proper allotment of funds and delegation of management, which the US also shares. The public sector is required to take political responsibility and include the private sector in the management of cultural heritage so both can make a profit. Giorgio et al. (2021) argue that the risk of state-controlled sites “is that the economic value predominates above the cultural value and, as a consequence, tends to distort dynamics in the working world of the professions engaged in the different areas of cultural heritage” (2021, 5). This risk is important for Italy to acknowledge so that the most ethical work can be done.

Economic considerations shape the presentation of archaeological collections and sites. Storchi (2019) discusses the ex-Casa Del Fascio in Predappio, the hometown of Fascist dictator Benito Mussolini. While trying to discourage neo-fascist pilgrimages, the town council wanted to reuse and restore the building. The EU-funded ATRIUM (Architecture of Totalitarian Regimes in Urban Managements) project reached a solution that aimed to create avenues for revenue without glorifying totalitarian pasts or tearing down architecture (Storchi 2019). This ethical consideration addresses issues with the proper use of funding and proper management of sites.

Literature on the imperial propaganda from Mussolini's regime reflects a suboptimal response from the state to this day. Falcucci (2021) argues that the colonial history of Italy is disregarded in the national museum record, or if the discussion is present, it is lacking because it does not present the full story. Mussolini oversaw the creation of the Mostra which "was designed to spread knowledge of the presence of Italian colonies in fairs around the world and to store material ready for other exhibitions and propaganda in the country" (Falcucci 2021, 124). As a way to spread propaganda for Il Duce, museums and fairs, as state institutions, reached the public to spread Mussolini's desired messaging about his regime. The lasting impacts of Mussolini's creations are still being deconstructed to examine how they have impacted Italians' framing of cultures and the past.

In a news article from 2020, Igiaba Scego, an Italian writer of Somali descent, is quoted, "Italians often think the colonies were a good thing. The problem is that this part of history is not taught in schools" (Imam 2020). The discourse in Italy about these issues is only a recent addition to the social landscape. As Violi (2012) argues, conflicts in society develop a "range of culturally diverse memory politics that affect...the national, and global, identities of these societies" (2012, 35). Due to Mussolini, much of Italian and Roman history is romanticized in

public memory. The excavations of the Imperial Forum aimed to resemble the power of the Roman Empire. Mussolini created exhibitions with a “unilateral and hagiographic vision of history” to consolidate his power in all public-facing institutions (Falcucci 2021, 122). Ethically, this skewed version of history impacted Italians to “make sure that imperial and racist ideas penetrated deep into the consciousness of the Italians, to remain there well beyond the fall of the regime” (Falcucci 2021, 146). This is another lasting impact of Mussolini’s regime that proves ethically difficult for current museum professionals and archaeologists. The ethical issues in Italian archaeological sites and museums reflect their focus on heritage sites, their proper usage, and the proper use of funds. The analysis of issues from Mussolini’s regime reflects different sets of ethical concerns for museum work and archaeology today.

Italians feel proud of their country; however, this is complicated by their relationship with the Roman Empire and the Fascist Era. McFeaters (2007) identifies the power of nationalism in Italy; “Italian archaeology was influenced by nationalism immediately after the modern state was created, and saw nationalism reach its most influential period during the interwar years when the Fascist regime sought to resurrect classical Rome” (2007, 50). Others also argue that archaeology can be politically useful if it is institutionalized and accepted by the public sphere, where then it can become part of propaganda, as discussed previously (Flemming 2020; McFeaters 2007). The inverse can also be true when the public is subconsciously affected by nationalist propaganda. Nationalism and patriotism due to archaeological finds can cause tensions; some Italians do not want to be associated with the conquests of the past or the national destruction and neglect by Mussolini. “Few matters excite as much political or moral feeling here, and Fascism is the sort of issue that is often discreetly put aside in polite conversation,” as



cited from *The New York Times* (Dionne Jr. 1984). Fascism is handled extremely gently in Italy, but the public has shown that they are not fearful to be critical of cultural heritage management.

As of 2018, a study that looked into public perceptions of archaeology in European countries showed 86% of surveyed Italians thought that the management of archaeology should be the responsibility of the state, which is higher than the European average of 65% (Kajda et al. 2018, 105). In Italy, the Ministry of Cultural Heritage controls the management of all archaeological heritage. With that, 90% of Italians report that the efforts by the Ministry are insufficient (Kajda et al. 2018, 105). This reflects that a critical public, who is aware of the failures of the Ministry, can interfere with the dissemination of nationalist sentiments through archaeological propaganda.

It is valuable to consider the unique contexts in the US and Italy to explain why differences have occurred through the later history of museums in the US and Italy, and how those experiences impact public memory and perceptions of current archaeological work in heritage sites and museums. The public perceptions of archaeology and museum work in the US and Italy are understandably different. This can be accounted for, in part by nationalistic institutions that are designed with agendas to develop feelings of pride in one's nation. The current study highlights the perspectives of museum professionals on these topics. The following section reflects the transparency of the respondents; they acknowledge that museums are sites of problematization in academia and the media, while simultaneously being the best spaces to create and celebrate solutions.

#### IV. Presentation of Culture: How We Frame History in Museums

Through my research, I conducted and analyzed six semi-structured interviews. Through my social networks, I was able to contact six professionals working in museums or museum-adjacent

capacities, like public history.<sup>1</sup> Because I wanted to compare the US and Italy, I ensured an even split of the informants in regards to their location. Three of the informants are scholars working in Italy: two are Italian and one is Australian. The other three are American scholars working in the US. Some of the informants were people that I knew personally, and others were people I was meeting for the first time over the Zoom call.<sup>2</sup>

The interview questions ranged from asking the informant about their personal and professional experiences with museums, broad and detailed ethical considerations in their occupation, and how they see the role of museums on a political level, as well as their perceptions on the future of museums (see the appendix).<sup>3</sup> The informants provided extremely detailed responses that greatly benefited this research. In the following section, I flesh out patterns and themes from the conversations with museum professionals in the US and Italy as well as the major divergences in perspectives.

#### A. Repercussions and Recontextualization

The first major finding suggests that the interviewees find their roles in the field important for sharing accurate, contextualized information with the public in an ethical and effective manner. The national legacies of both countries have contributed to structural

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<sup>1</sup> The research proposal and application were approved by the IRB and the interviews were conducted over two months. The research participants were chosen through purposive and snowball sampling due to the constraints of this project.

<sup>2</sup> Maintaining professional rapport with them was important to the success of the interviews, as well as keeping the conversation light-hearted when appropriate. This is vital because I asked the informants questions about the ethical considerations of their professions and the institutions for which they work; sensitivity is required when critiquing aspects of those topics.

<sup>3</sup> I received written informed consent from all of the participants and all participants are given pseudonyms. I kept the pseudonyms consistent with my relationship with the informant; if I refer to them by a formal title, it is because that is how I refer to them outside of this research study. Five interviews were conducted on Zoom and were recorded, with their explicit consent. The interviews lasted anywhere from 40 minutes to 70 minutes. The last interview was conducted in-person in the participant's museum office, and it was 80 minutes long. After each interview, the participants received a receipt of their consent and a reminder of their protections (see the appendix). It is important to note that the informants are not speaking on behalf of their institutions, but rather on their own personal beliefs and experiences with the topics at hand.

inequalities that impact daily life, but they find that museums can play a role in deconstructing these problematic notions.

Acknowledging a harmful past can be difficult for some people, but it must be acknowledged in order to move forward. As two interviewees, MaryAnn and Dr. Bauer argued, visitors do not often go to a museum with a very critical eye. So, it is the impetus of the professionals to educate and expand the perspectives of the public to question what they think they know. It is also often the case that visitors simply do not know the history, and therefore it is important for museums to present it to the public. The role of a museum professional is to make visitors aware of public history and different aspects of that history, the good and the bad while managing the visitors' experience. Some progressive displays and exhibits recontextualize objects to more properly present it. The original problematized displays may make people uncomfortable or stir up feelings of national guilt. A museum professional should encourage visitors to explore and reflect on why they may feel uncomfortable.

Italian public education professional, Chiara, said that sharing Italian history with her children was a major priority for her. The proliferation of museums is important because she wants to share what she considers their ancestral past with her sons. Ava also views the Italian public as appreciators of history and they desire cultural knowledge.

Ava, a recent college graduate, spent time working with the archaeological park services in Rome, Italy. She spoke about her experiences in Rome as well as her home country, Australia. Ava's perspective is particularly valuable because of her time spent working in Rome and her knowledge of the impacts of British colonial powers in Australia that mirror the colonization of the US. Ava reflected on the lack of general knowledge about archaeology among the public and the skew of institutions and media due to colonialism; she said, "Not only is the origin story of

British colonisation of the land a controversy, its fabrication in favour of colonisers is enforced largely by the education system and media.” The quote reflects her acknowledgment of the issues with education and media presentations of information. She continued and explained that the presence of work from Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people in museums “prompts the education and curiosity of white Australians.” Ava sees that showcasing multivocal artwork should be a priority as a method to educate and expand the cultural perspectives of the public as a way to reckon with the past.

This argument is echoed by American scholar Dr. Bauer, who said that it is the job of museum staff to make the public think about these things, referring to difficult conversations about the past. As a proponent of education, Dr. Bauer is also a professor who believes that museums stem from inherently colonial institutions. With this, it is important to reframe the idea of decolonizing museums, but perhaps indigenizing them. Dr. Bauer explained the importance of polyvocality and ensuring that exhibits are intentionally curated and narrative by stakeholder desires.

This also can be part of the approaches towards recontextualizing existing displays and collections. To paraphrase from the STEM Education Coordinator at an American museum campus, MaryAnn explained that it would be a shame to “throw the baby out with the bathwater.” By this, she meant that throwing away previously problematic exhibitions or items would be a waste of resources and inconsiderate for the ultimate decolonizing/indigenizing attitude. Museums are working towards recontextualizing galleries, collections, and exhibitions, rather than removing them completely. MaryAnn also referenced an old exhibition, Colonial Williamsburg that had previously used colonial rhetoric, and explained that they revamped it by changing the signs and programming to more accurately represent the time period and the

provenance of the artifacts. As shown in these interviews, education should be prioritized in museums' service to the communities they present.

#### B. Competence and Care

The second theme reflects the importance of competent and compassionate work in the fields of archaeology and museum studies. Although this seems like common sense, practically all of the interviewees emphasized this point. This does not only apply to methodological competence with good practices but also to care for artifacts once they are put into museum collections. Increasing technical skills is always a focus in archaeological work. Further, with the development of ethics protocols and NAGPRA, returning remains and objects has been a large focus of museum institutions.

When I asked Ava and Italian archaeologist and professor, Dr. Altobello, about the most pressing ethical concerns in their work, they both said it was important to follow rigorous methodological practices while limiting preconceived assumptions about the field site or artifacts. Dr. Altobello joked about the frustrations she has felt in the field when working with others who did not have the same rigor of training. She laughed about it but as she explained further, the joking was with an underlying tone that it was pathetic and not something to be proud of. Both Ava and Dr. Altobello advocated for the development of training programs that include ethics, as well as practical technical field skills.

As for museums, Dr. Bauer brought up an interesting point that I had not thought about prior to our conversation; he said that citations are not expected in museum spaces and gallery walls. This requires a much more specific conversation about exhibition practices, however, it shows just how many considerations there are in the museum world and the dutifulness professionals must have.

American scholar and museum professional Dr. Rivera and I discussed the juggling act of repatriation. His perspective is valuable because of his research focus on cultural and social change in the Caribbean. He thinks that repatriation is very complicated, but a necessary step towards properly respecting the stakeholders and traditional owners. NAGPRA provides guidelines and can open conversations with indigenous people about where they want their items preserved, which can increase communication for future potential collaborations. MaryAnn also feels this way, explaining her answer by referring to the native consultant group that works with the museum. She thinks that the way to progress in the museum world is through slow and intentional steps.

Dr. Altobello agrees with this, in the Italian context as well. However, differently, she does not see repatriation as a large issue in Italy; in fact, a lot more items are repatriated back to Italy rather than from Italy returned elsewhere. I focus on my interview with Dr. Altobello because her insight provides a slightly different orientation than most American scholars are used to hearing. She notes that Italy hardly starts conversations of repatriation, but is always willing to accept the return of heritage items. When I asked whether decolonial and repatriation-based discourses influence her career she responded that it is not as big of an issue in her work because it is a more appropriate conversation for the unique US experience, referring to colonial settlement in the Americas. She emphasized every situation has its own context to be wary of.

She expanded the conversation to The British Museums, an institution that is often in public discourse, particularly regarding possession of The Elgin Marbles and the isolated Caryatid Porch, originally from Greece. Dr. Altobello said that each item needs to be an individual case and we must be cautious about these things; nothing is black and white. Further, when we discussed the Egyptian obelisks seen all through Rome, she was surprised that I

presented the idea of repatriation. She had never truly considered that because they are so rooted in Roman history; she did not know what to think. As she pondered, she concluded that we must be cautious to not “go over the deep end” because it is not realistic nor is it necessarily to the right end. This thought process aligns with her sentiments regarding competent methodological work and care; with proper research and care, repatriation can be an important step, however, it should not be tied to political correctness or political messaging. The preservation of the artifacts takes priority for Dr. Altobello, as I noted by her miniature amphorae replica earrings.

As mentioned by MaryAnn and others, more can always be done to improve the work done in museums. Many museums hold material culture and are being asked to respond to the current discourse around decolonization, repatriation, representation, and overall museum ethics, however, this differs in unique contexts. This is seen through the steps museum professionals are taking today to work towards new and progressive goals.

### C. Bureaucracy and Budgets

The third major pattern from the interview process is that museums have institutional limitations that need to be discussed in order to continue providing ethical exhibitions to the public. Institutional bureaucracy and financial limitations can negatively impact which collections are selected to be exhibited and their proper preservation.

The interviewees spoke about the bureaucratic obstacles and limitations of museum work, especially museums with archaeological collections. The priority of stakeholders was discussed differently by the US and Italian scholars. The US professionals must consider the desires of the communities represented in the collections or exhibits because of the devastating impacts of settler colonialism, while the Italians consider most of the open-air museums and collections their own.

Despite this, Dr. Altobello and Chiara both thought that there was not a strong connection between Italians and Roman identity, given the establishment of Italy was in the 19<sup>th</sup> Century.

When asked “Do you feel like archaeology and anthropology get political and governmental support? How?” most laughed with a lighthearted “no” and started their responses by talking about resource allocation. Dr. Rivera talked me through the grant process at his well-known institution; I can sympathize with how frustrating the process can be. He said that there are many avenues to receive funding at the well-known large-scale institution and many opportunities through UNICEF or National Geographic, however, it takes patience and persistence. Sometimes funding dries up and gets picked back up a few years later.

MaryAnn and Ava highlighted the importance of funding. Without resource allocation to research projects, repatriation efforts are reduced, and proper presentation of data is diminished. Ava made an interesting point about Italian processes in comparison to her experiences in Australia; she found that archaeology holds value in Italy as a way to better understand history, rather than just a legal process that it feels like in Australia for salvage archaeology. MaryAnn also emphasizes that there are differences between publicly and privately funded museums; the institution she works for may have less opportunity for funding than a national museum.

The Italian scholars see the resource allocation as present, but poorly managed. Chiara noted the importance of Italy in the Mediterranean region, reflected in the exceptional documentation and preservation of Roman and Italian, especially since the mid-20<sup>th</sup> Century. In this sense, Italy devotes resources to the upkeep and preservation of its national heritage. However, there could always be more resources for preservation. Dr. Altobello develops the claim from her fellow Italian interviewee. She does not think that the funds allocated to research or museum work are enough. She thinks that tourism and money are largely the motivation for



the funding of archaeological and museum projects. She wishes that the funding came faster and in larger amounts for the sake of education rather than milking their heritage for capital gains. Tourism is a big economic asset for Italy, especially in Rome where Dr. Altobello and Chiara work. One would think that more money would be allocated to the heritage sites in Rome, but Dr. Altobello highlighted the lack of priority for research funding from the government. Practically as more of a hindrance, excavations, construction, and large open-air museums, seen throughout Rome, can interrupt public transit, as noted by Chiara, and become an obstacle to the daily life of Rome's citizens and therefore, are seen as an issue by local government.

These responses demonstrate that they know most issues within museums or archaeological work stem from a lack of funding. It is easy to argue that this issue is the largest problem as we fight toward more progressive thinking and messaging, however, the solution is not quite as simple. None of the interviewees had a perfectly clear picture of the future of museums; MaryAnn and others emphasized the inefficacy of blanket statements about science and culture, or blindly throwing money at institutions to "fix" their exhibitions. However, all thought that it was important to move towards more equitable, representative, polyvocal, and holistic approaches to exhibition creation, research, and preservation of collections.

## V. Discussion

Museum professionals have some overarching, overlapping values, as seen in the data from US and Italian professionals. Generally, they all prioritize education, proper research methods, and preservation, while managing the bureaucracy that is inherent in institutions. Belgium, for example, is a clear case in which the public does not know about the colonial past of the former kingdom, an issue seen in the Italian literature as well (Falcucci 2021). The AfricaMuseum expends resources to educate the public on their exploitative colonial history that is out of the

sightlines of current Belgians. As cited in my previous work, on the AfricaMuseum website, they plainly say, “[Belgian citizens] have little factual knowledge about their country’s colonial past...some stories from the history of Belgium and the Congo, which are often little known to the Belgian public” (Cheyney 2023). This example reflects the importance of education on colonialism through museum work, as explained by the interviewees in the US and Italy. However, there are some different priorities within education, specifically regarding the repercussions of holding colonially acquired pieces and the recontextualization of items.

The interviewees take proactive approaches towards compassionate and competent work. It seems that some large museum institutions are responding to public outcries for action, rather than, like the interviewees, leading the charge toward more ethical museum work. For example, the Metropolitan Museum of Art in the US seems to be pro-decolonization, albeit begrudgingly.

The website features a graphic that leads to a statement about the current discourse around decolonization of knowledge; “as we all are aware and is reflected in near-daily news stories—museum collections are under increasingly intense scrutiny” ...The director at The Met, Max Hollein, goes on to explain a few of the new goals of the museum as a public-serving institution. This comment is complex and speaks to the changing discourses in museums as institutions with many educational, social, and bureaucratic responsibilities” (Cheyney 2023)

This citation reflects a critique of the lack of care going into The Met’s programming. In a public statement, it is inappropriate to create action plans only because of ‘intense scrutiny.’ Morality is museums can be hazy no matter what; the institutional leaders should be transparent and want to be forthcoming with information about their collections and goals for the future, as the interviewees reflect.

The interviewees discussed their experiences with funding and grants for archaeological fieldwork and at museums. They mentioned the issues of red tape in institutions and its effects on research, museums, open-air museums, and heritage sites. Stakeholders of collections are not necessarily the people making the decisions about the exhibitions. Boards of trustees allocate and distribute resources within the institution. Their priorities may be incongruent with what is best from the stakeholders' perspectives or a conservator's perspective. However, we see strides in the museum world towards increased transparency and programming that reflects on colonialism and questionable artifact provenances, also seen in the responses from the interviewees. The Ashmolean Museum features a podcast on its homepage called 'Fingerprints' and it aims to "uncover the invisible fingerprints left behind by makers, looters, archaeologists, soldiers, rulers, curators, and more. These stories of touch also reveal how forces of conflict and colonialism have shaped the Museum" (Cheyney 2023). This example reflects the priorities of the institution, through funding allocation to this podcast project. This is echoed in the interviews. In particular, MarryAnn reflected on the benefits of collaboration with a native consultant group which is advocated for in the literature (Swan and Jordan 2015).

Echoed by some of the interviewees, most of the literature suggests that there are different museum discourses taking place in these two countries (Falcucci 2021; Garoian 2001; Gazi 2014; Giorgio et al. 2021; Latham and Simmons 2019; Von Oswald and Tinius 2020; Storchi 2019; Violi 2012). However, interestingly, this is most evident by what the interviewees neglected to say, and national histories contribute to these differences.

The two countries have different priorities in museums and archaeological sites. I find that heritage protection policies and the long-lasting impacts of colonialism in the US impact how museums operate and produce knowledge. The current scholarship advocates for a shift towards

decolonizing work, or as one interviewee stated, toward indigenizing work (Garoian 2001; Gazi 2014; Latham and Simmons 2019; Von Oswald and Tinius 2020; Swan and Jordan 2015). As for Italy, the protection of heritage sites and the erasure of Fascism from the collective memory impact Italian museums and archaeological work. The interviewees speaking about Italian ethics did not address Mussolini and his impact on the urban and archaeological landscape of Italy. This reflects a disconnect; the national shame associated with the dictator impact the collective memories and therefore current methodological practices regarding museum education on Mussolini. Downplaying the impact of horrendous national phenomena is not unique to Italy, as the US has done with same historically with colonialism, however, unlike the US, Italy has only dipped its toe into the deep end of unpacking the cultural impacts of Mussolini's regime in educational spaces. The ATRIUM project from the EU is the closest mimic of the recontextualization that is growing in popularity in the US (Storchi 2019).

The EU work and the overall critical lens that civilians hold to protect their heritage are powerful in changing the landscape of museum work and archaeological practices. However, even given these progressive additions, the shame around Mussolini begs us to ask the question of whether Mussolini's legacy was successful in building a new national identity for Italians through archaeological sites and museums as Falcucci (2021) posits. Perhaps even more importantly, it is vital to ask whether that nationalist identity was maintained through material culture in these spaces, even after the fall and erasure of the Fascist Era. Rather than just the removal of iconography from monuments and textbooks, deconstructing the impacts of the Fascist Era could prove fruitful for the Italian public in understanding their relationship with mid-20<sup>th</sup> Century history and the expansion of open-air museums and archaeological

developments. After all, it was Benito Mussolini who said, “It is humiliating to remain with our hands folded while others write history. It matters little who wins” (“Benito Mussolini” 2021).

## VI. Conclusion

Through this paper, I demonstrate how national legacies drastically impact museum work and archaeological ethical practices in different countries which can change how the public interprets the past. The complexities of national histories influence how current researchers and professionals work in the fields. Reckoning with their pasts, the US and Italy respond differently to current decolonial and preservation conversations. I asked, *how are ethical considerations of museum professionals shaped by nationalism and evolving perceptions of how museums should serve the public in two different contexts?* I synthesized literature from scholars in the field and conducted interviews with American and Italian archaeologists and museum professionals.

Archaeologists and museum professionals in the US and Italy understand ethical considerations in different ways. Through the interview process, I found that American archaeologists often spoke about repatriation and representation when asked about ethical considerations while Italian archaeologists focused on proper methodology during research excavations.

When investigating ethical considerations, I found that museums in the US respond to the nation’s colonial past by delineating resources to expand museums to include more diverse topics through exhibitions and by ethically presenting, preserving, or repatriating cultural items in their possession. Further, collaborative studies and indigenizing thought processes are part of the important educational role that museums play in American society, as emphasized by Dr. Bauer, MaryAnn, and scholars Swan and Jordan (2015). On the other hand, my research shows that the primary ethical considerations in Italy are methodological ethics and preservation, rather

than decoloniality. Italian professionals are focused on how to engage with ancient open-air museums and their preservation. With the rich history of the Roman Empire, Italian archaeologists are tasked with different considerations when excavating than Americans who excavate on colonized land.

The differences in responses between American and Italian archaeologists and museum professionals reflect the differing priorities in the two countries that are dependent on their national legacies. The US is still dealing with the shameful past of settler colonialism. Italy, on the other hand, does not carry shame or feel a responsibility to respond to the abuses and conquests during the Roman Empire. However, the establishment of the current nation-state, Italy in the 19<sup>th</sup> Century, marks the beginning of Italians feeling a responsibility or shame for the actions from their collective memory and legacy, as seen in the Fascist Era with Mussolini. This period greatly influenced archaeology and museum work. Current exhibitions and open-air museums are beginning to be intellectually deconstructed to accurately reflect the Era.

Typically enjoyed as a form of education or entertainment, US visitors accept information without substantial critical analysis, as Dr. Bauer and MaryAnn highlighted. When museums are spoken about in a negative light, politically correct cultural criticisms from American audiences may come from buzzwords in the news rather than criticisms grounded in research and facts. Overall, according to the interviewees, public perceptions of archaeology and museum work in the US are positive; after all, most visitors must pay for entry and therefore hope to enjoy their experience.

In Italy, museums serve the same educational and entertainment purposes as in the US. Italians are fairly informed about antiquity cultural history, but have less knowledge of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century. Archaeology and museum work can impede their day-to-day living as excavations can

impact their neighborhoods and commutes. Regardless, Italian interviewees confirmed that museums and excavations are still a sense of pride for Italians, no matter the inconvenience.

The questions asked in this research warrant lengthy and complex responses. The results of this research show that there is no single conclusion or single solution to correct mistakes and to learn from the past. The three themes presented in this study serve as the tip of the iceberg for a proper analysis of this research topic. Future research on these topics should continue to deconstruct confounding factors that influence museum work and archaeology. It would also be interesting to do larger sampled surveys relating to these topics so trends can be analyzed on a large, more representational scale, as this is one of the limitations of this research. Transparency is vital for the proliferation of museums and archaeological research. The steps being made towards indigenizing US museums and acknowledging Italian downfalls are not linear processes. Working towards decolonizing museums will not solve the problems at hand, just as the removal of Fascist iconography did not remove the shameful legacy in Italy. It is only once those periods, that of settler colonialism in the US and Fascism in Italy, are fully understood that we can begin to properly reflect on the ghosts of colonialism and Fascism to create more accurate, representative, and recontextualized museum spaces.

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VIII. Appendix

A. Consent Form

## Informed Consent Statement

Researcher: Fiona Cheyney – contact [cheyfi01@gettysburg.edu](mailto:cheyfi01@gettysburg.edu) with any questions

Institution: Gettysburg College – contact [irb@gettysburg.edu](mailto:irb@gettysburg.edu) with any questions

Anthropology Department Research Advisor: Kirby Farah – contact [kfarah@gettysburg.edu](mailto:kfarah@gettysburg.edu) with any questions

IRB Application #1139

Research Questions:

What are the different ethical considerations of archaeologists and museum workers who deal with archaeological collections in Italy and in the US? What specific (national) histories contribute to these differences? What differences exist in public perceptions of archaeology in these respective countries?

Purpose:

The purpose of this informed consent statement is to inform the research participants that their interview data will be used for Fiona Cheyney's honors thesis and anthropology capstone paper.

Methods:

The methodology for this honors thesis paper is an extensive literature review supported by semi-structured approximately 30-minute interviews which will be held over January 2024 with seven purposively sampled participants based on their knowledge and experience. Zoom recorded audio and visual or voice memo recorded audio files will be kept by Fiona Cheyney and analyzed, to be deleted upon completion of the research.

Involvement:

Participation is voluntary and the research participants can decline to participate and can refuse to answer a question or do anything asked of him/her. The participants can also withdraw from the study at any time without penalty. There are no foreseeable risks for the research participants. There are no foreseeable benefits for the participants' involvement in the study. There is no compensation for involvement. Pseudonyms will be used to protect the identity of the participants and their identifiable data will be kept confidential.

Please save a copy of this record for your files.

## B. Interview Guide

## Interview Guide for a Semi-Structured Interview

## Project Aims

*How are ethical considerations of museum professionals shaped by nationalism and evolving perceptions of how museums should serve the public?*

- What are the different ethical considerations of museum workers who deal with archaeological collections in Italy and in the US?
- What specific (national) histories contribute to these differences?
- What differences exist in public perceptions of archaeology in these respective countries?

## Interview Guide

- Personal Perspective
  - Can you please tell me a little bit about yourself?
    - What's your occupation?
    - Can you describe your research area of focus?
  - What motivated you to pursue your career?
- Research Today
  - Could you tell me about how you view anthropology/archaeology and the value it has in society?
  - Do you think the public likes or dislikes anthropology and archaeology?
    - Do you see this being different in different regions of the world?
      - If yes, how so?
      - What do you think influences this difference?
  - Do you feel like archaeology and anthropology get political and governmental support? How?
    - Do you see this being different in different regions of the world?
      - If yes, how so?
      - What do you think influences this difference?
- Ethics
  - As a member of the public, what do you view as the most pressing ethical considerations of archaeological research?
    - How do they handle them?
  - Do you think the ethical conditions are different by nation?
- Museums
  - In the US, many museums are being asked to respond to the current discourse around decolonization, repatriation, representation, and overall museum ethics. Do you think museums in Italy have an obligation to respond to this discourse? Or is it a different conversation?
    - How do you think they are handling this role?
    - Do you think museums should be saying or doing anything in response?
      - Do you think anything limits change within museums?

- What about in museums and ancient ruins in other parts of the world? Do they have an obligation to respond as well?
- Do you see any new types of museums that are arising in the cities? Covering different topics?
  - Do you see this being different in different regions of the world?
    - If yes, how so?
    - What do you think influences this difference?
- Do you find that archaeology and museum work increase nationalism/patriotism?
  - What is the role of tourism in archaeology?
    - What do you think of the intersection?
    - As a member of the public, do you take pride in the history found through archaeology or is it more of a hinderance to your day-to-day living?
- Future
  - What does the future of archaeology and anthropology look like to you?