

Museums : Italy

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There are early examples in Italy of private museums as places “of conservation, research and study”. One prime example is the 17th-century *Pinacoteca Ambrosiana* in [Milan](#) (17th century). The organization of museums in the old states of Italy began in the second half of the 18th century, in tandem with the development of a heritage policy. The main aim was to safeguard the heritage, above all archeological, which came to light at that time. It was for this reason, and in order to celebrate local splendours and antiquities, that in [Verona](#) the Marquis Scipione Maffei opened up the lapidarium for the city, while in [Naples](#), in 1777, King Ferdinand IV set up the *Museo Borbonico*, nowadays known as the *Museo Archeologico Nazionale* (“National Archeological Museum”), to house all the finds from the digs in [Pompeii and Herculaneum](#), alongside the Farnese collection. The museum, partially opened to the public in the ten years of French rule (1806-15), was inaugurated in 1816, with the return of the Bourbons. The Grand Duke of Tuscany, Pietro Leopoldo, following on from the Family Pact of 1737, also linked the artistic heritage of the Medici family to the city of [Florence](#) and opened up to the public the [Uffizi](#) gallery “for State adornment, public utility and to attract the curiosity of visitors”. The same was happening in [Rome](#), where Popes Clement XII, Clement XIV and Pius VI inaugurated the *Museo Capitolino* (1734) and the *Museo Pio-Clementino* (1769-99), nowadays the main core of the Vatican Museums. At the same time, institutions were set up for educational purposes and for exhibiting works of art, to support the fine arts academies. The Brera gallery in [Milan](#), commissioned by Empress Maria Theresa in 1776 and then opened to the public in the Napoleonic era, is an important example. A similar case occurred in [Venice](#) where, as early as 1750, the *Accademia dei Pittori* was established, then refounded in 1807 based on the Milan model and opened to the public in 1817. It was not until 1882, however, that the gallery was recognized as a separate institution from the art school. These establishments were plundered during French rule, when works were seized and numerous canvases and sculptures were transferred overseas. Only a few returned to their cities of origin thanks to patient diplomatic work, including that of Antonio [Canova](#) in [Paris](#).

During the *Risorgimento*, the need arose to showcase both special local features and to celebrate nationalistic values through exhibitions and museums; this movement reached a peak after the unification of Italy. After 1861, new museums were built alongside the existing ones, often founded for the precise purpose of celebrating the sense of national belonging. In 1878, in Turin, the *Museo Nazionale del Risorgimento* was opened, followed by, among others, those in Milan (1886), [Bologna](#) (1893), Rome (1911) and [Genoa](#) (1915). Art galleries were remodelled in a national-identitarian mode. In Venice, for example, the *Gallerie dell'Accademia* was reorganized as the largest collection of Venetian art, mirroring both local and national identity.

After unification, the Kingdom of Italy had to manage a large and diverse artistic and archeological heritage, scattered throughout the country and with differing characteristics. That of former capitals and large cities was joined by the equally rich one of smaller towns, as documented in the works of Giovanni Battista Cavalcaselle and Giovanni Morelli. The difficulty of administrating this artistic heritage soon became apparent, complicated by the subsequent annexation of the Veneto region (1866) and by the taking of Rome (1870). The Italian government could, however, count on a vast and proven experience in safeguarding and managing its heritage. In the Kingdom of the Two Sicilies and the Papal State, specific laws, often undeniably effective, had been in existence for some time. In Rome, for example, in the early 19th century, laws had already been introduced against the destruction and dispersion of the cultural heritage, gaining the best results with the Pacca edict (1820), which created an impressive system for the safeguarding, conservation and cataloguing of assets. With the opening of museums and the creation of an organization for their management, a ban was imposed on the international sale of ancient paintings, sculptures and archeological finds. This problem was not considered as much of a priority in the other States: in the Kingdom of Lombardy-Venetia, it would have prevented the exporting of some of the most important private collections, such as that of the Barbarigos of Venice, purchased by the Tsar of Russia in 1850.

The original autonomy of the individual territories in their heritage management ended up creating a heterogeneous and incoherent system. The first Italian law for heritage protection was not passed until 1902. Further problems emerged between 1861 and 1866-67 with the dissolution of religious congregations and orders and the State confiscation of their ecclesiastic artistic heritage. In order to ensure the conservation of the new assets, the government decided to move them to the main Italian cities. This policy pursued an agenda to add value to the national heritage; this was not always

accepted locally, however, since state intervention was seen as a sort of robbery, stripping communities of works that were an integral part of local identity and history. Thus, a dispute arose between the central government, which sought to concentrate all the works in larger cities, and localities, which laid claim to them as part of their artistic, historical and identity roots. The aim of attracting visitors and travellers to smaller towns, and of providing educational incentives by means of artworks, was at the centre of the confrontation between the State and the individual towns. In many cases, the local argument won the day, thus creating a decentralized museum system which still exists today. Large national museums are supplemented by the municipal collections of individual towns, often housed in places which symbolize their past – Castelvecchio in Verona, the Castello Sforzesco in Milan, and Palazzo Ducale in Venice; yet each one is intended, with its own distinctive features, to contribute to an overarching national identity.

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