



## **The Museum of Geography of the University of Padua: *exploring* the past legacy, *measuring* present challenges, *telling* future objectives**

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### **Abstract**

How can a series of teaching practices and geographical instruments turn into a museum's collection? Where does the project of a Museum of Geography start and how does it actually take place? This article aims to retrace the phases that led to the opening of the Museum of Geography of the University of Padua in December 2019. The University of Padua was one of the first Italian academic institutions to establish a Chair of Geography in 1872, and the occasion of the 150th anniversary of the chair provides a perfect opportunity to make a first assessment of the museum's life and to present it to a wider community. On this occasion, the article keeps trace of the museum's historical roots, presents its main educational and dissemination activities, and sketches its future agenda. After a brief Introduction, in the first section the historical presentation of Paduan academic geography, the scientific, logistic, and social dimensions are considered along which the museum's planning developed. An overview on the museum's tangible and intangible heritage is then followed by a virtual visit to its three main halls. In the second part of the article, the museum's opening is considered within the framework of the general effects of the pandemic on the life of public cultural institutions. The final part is dedicated to the objectives of the museum, especially in the field of geographical education.

**Keywords:** Museum of Geography, Geographical Heritage, Geographical Education, Public Geography

### **1. Introduction**

The Museum of Geography was inaugurated at the University of Padua on 3<sup>rd</sup> December 2019. It is the first museum of geography in Italy and, since its very beginning, it has become a point of reference for other universities in the country, which have been discussing the possibility to start their own museum projects, also within the group GEOMUSE – Museums of

Geography of the Association of Italian Geographers (AGeI). Since the museum in Padua functions as an example for a conversation in the group on the “already existing or to-be-launched initiatives of recognition and valorization of geographical heritage, in the most ancient academic

institutions in Italy”<sup>1</sup>, this paper wants to take the occasion of the 150th anniversary of the chair of Geography at the University of Padua as a perfect opportunity to make a first assessment of the museum’s life.

Geography has a role in several museums. Most of them include maps and spatial information that contribute to effectively contextualizing the exhibited collections. On the other hand, only a few museums can be found that are primarily focused on geography. The difficulties linked to the complex and interdisciplinary nature of this science have probably discouraged initiatives in this direction. The situation was no different in the past. Already in 1936 Pierre George complained about the pedagogical loss caused by the absence of museums of geography<sup>2</sup> (George, 1936). Nevertheless, as objects have always been crucial for the construction and transmission of knowledge (Lourenço, 2005), geographical collections exist in nearly every academic institution where geography is taught. Indeed, geography has always needed maps, wall-charts, photographs, globes, atlases and terrain models as didactic aids, as well as instruments of measurements to support fieldwork. As owners of geography collections, universities hold, therefore, the foundations on which museums of geography could be built. Only few, though, have undertaken this adventure which, according to the recently reformulated definition of museums, entails researching, collecting, conserving, interpreting and exhibiting the tangible and intangible heritage, while “offering varied experiences for education, enjoyment, reflection and knowledge sharing” (ICOM 2022) in a participatory way to the widest possible audience. In January 2023

the constantly updated Worldwide Database of University Museums and Collections<sup>3</sup> developed by the Committee for University Museums and Collections (UMAC) of ICOM returned 55 results when searching for “geography”. These include a large number of botanical gardens, several interdisciplinary museums (as, for example, the Science and Technology Education Centre at the University of KwaZulu-Natal in South Africa or the Hangares Museo Interactivo at the National University of La Plata in Argentina) and a few ethnographic or anthropological museums (such as the Ethnography Museum of Kazan Federal University in Russia). Restricting attention to the more geography-focused institutions, beside the expected relevant number of collections (with a clear prevalence of map collections), only two Museums of Geography can be found: the Museum of Geography at Tbilisi State University in Georgia<sup>4</sup>, created in 1958, enhancing the geographical production of Georgian geographers, and the Museum of Geography at the University of Padua, object of this article.

Here we retrace the phases that led to the establishment of the museum, to keep trace of its educational and dissemination activities so far, and to sketch its future goals. After a brief historical presentation of Paduan academic geography, the scientific, logistic, and social dimensions are considered along which the museum’s planning developed. An overview on the museum’s tangible and intangible heritage is then followed by a virtual visit to its three main halls, which correspond to museum’s slogan “Explore Measure and Tell”. In the second part of the article, the museum’s complex beginnings are considered within the framework of the general effects of the pandemic on the life of public cultural institutions. The final part is dedicated to the objectives of the museum, especially in the field of geographic education.

<sup>1</sup> On the main aims of the GEOMUSE group of the AGEI see: [https://www.ageiweb.it/wp-content/uploads/file\\_dei\\_gruppi/GEOMUSE/Presentazione-GEOMUSE.pdf](https://www.ageiweb.it/wp-content/uploads/file_dei_gruppi/GEOMUSE/Presentazione-GEOMUSE.pdf).

<sup>2</sup> Monica De Filipo presented a reconstruction of the historical difficulties in creating Museums of Geography during the Study Day “Oltre la Globalizzazione – Narrazioni/Narratives” organized by the Società di Studi Geografici (Como, 9 December 2022). Thanks to the author and to the curators of Session 6, Riccardo Morri and Sandra Leonardi, for sharing the presentation files.

<sup>3</sup> <https://university-museums-and-collections.net/>.

<sup>4</sup> <https://tsu.ge/en/museum/page/Museum-of-Geography>.

## 2. Geography at the University of Padua: a long history of geographic teaching

The history of geographic teaching in Padua has deep roots, which date back to at least the second half of the 19th century. In 1872, the first Chair of Geography was established at the University of Padua. It was the first in Italy after the Chair of Geography and Statistics established in Turin in 1857 which, however, had only been intermittently active (Sereni, 2006). The Paduan chair is rooted in Austro-Hungarian geographical culture; indeed, the university had been a Habsburg institution from 1817 to 1866 and, like every other philosophical faculty of the Empire, it underwent as a consequence of the *Thun-Hohenstein'schen Universitätsreformen* a radical reformation around the middle of the 19th century that transformed it into a training hub for future lyceum teachers. Within this framework, geography courses were first held in 1855, around which time geographical teaching aids started to be acquired and a geographical subsection of the new historical–philological seminary was established for graduating and recently graduated students. Prof. Francesco Nardi, the abbot who had been appointed to lead the course, left Padua in 1858, after which the course disappeared from the university's educational offering (Lorenzi, 1922; Gallanti, 2019). However, in 1867, immediately after the annexation of Veneto to the Kingdom of Italy, Giuseppe Dalla Vedova, a history and geography teacher at the local lyceum, became a private lecturer of geography at the University of Padua. He was born in Padua and graduated in Vienna, where he attended classes under the geographer Simony. This gave him the opportunity to have direct contact with the novel approach that German-speaking scholars such as Alexander von Humboldt and Carl Ritter were applying to geographic research. He began to teach this approach at his Italian high school and at university classes. In 1872, when the University of Padua had completed its transition from the Habsburg to the Italian system, the Chair of Geography was officially established, with professor Dalla Vedova becoming its first holder. From Padua in 1875 he moved to Rome, where he also became Secretary (1877–1896) and then President (1900–1906) of the Italian

Geographical Society (Almagià, 1912; Luzzana Caraci, 2004).

## 3. Toward a Museum of Geography: a lively place of geographical memory

Several important scholars have been appointed to the Chair of Geography since its establishment, including Giovanni Marinelli, Roberto Almagià, and, later on, Giuseppe Morandini (Varotto, 2015). Each enriched the associated Institute of Geography both from a tangible (research and teaching materials) and intangible (research and teaching practices and methods) point of view. In 1903, a Chair of Physical Geography was also established. Then, after the Second World War in particular, human and physical geographers worked in close collaboration. This led to the creation of the first Department of Geography in Italy in 1984, which aimed to experiment with new organizational and scientific solutions and share different geographic perspectives and methodologies (Bondesan, 1992, 1995; Croce and Varotto, 2001).

This virtuous reality suddenly came to an end in 2011 as a result of the law 240/2010, which reformed university departments in Italy. The fourteen geographers active in Padua at that time were too few to set up an autonomous department, according to the new rules, and were therefore distributed across three wider structures. However, crisis is often a necessary condition for new visions in cultural processes; in this way, the final Council of the Department of Geography (31/12/2011) expressed a desire to give life to a Museum of Geography as a means to keep together and alive its tangible and intangible cultural legacy (Varotto et al., 2020).

The path was neither clear nor straightforward. As often happens in processes of heritage recognition and in the related transition from *environments of memory* to *places of memory*, the “right distance” from the past was needed to allow for the “re-appropriation” of the *munus* of the ancestors (Nora, 1986; Lowenthal, 1985). The adoption of novel perspectives and the attribution of new meanings to objects that in the meantime had lost their function, and sometimes even any

reason for their presence, was essential for overcoming the skepticism of those who saw in a Museum of Geography an incontrovertible “death certificate” for the discipline (Varotto, 2019).

During the five years that followed the closure of the Department of Geography, and after the human geographers had assimilated into the new Department of Historical and Geographic Sciences and the Ancient World (DiSSGeA), the museum started being planned in a way that covered three main domains: the scientific, the logistic, and the social. On a scientific level, by means of a previous general contribution (Vallerani, 1996), a degree thesis (Babetto, 2012), a research grant, a cataloguing assignment, a PhD dissertation (Gallanti, 2020) and several internships, the reconnaissance and cataloguing phases were undertaken, enabling quantification of the tangible heritage and the selection of the items that required restoration, together with the development of a related priority program.

From a logistical point of view, the museum was going to be hosted in the Wollemborg Palace (Figure 1), which since 1972 has been the seat for geography in Padua. The first objective was to identify the spaces destined for the permanent exhibition, future temporary ones, and storage areas. Connected to this was the planning of the necessary restoration works, conducted in collaboration with the University Center for Libraries, with which the museum would share some of its spaces and initiatives. This led to the selection, on the first floor, of the halls that would host the actual exhibition area, a teaching room, a first storage area and spaces for temporary exhibition; on the ground floor, there would be a front office and a second storage area.



Figure 1. Wollemborg Palace (Photo: G. Donadelli).

The third work direction consisted of starting to “feed” the widespread need for geographic education. By 2015/16 workshops for school groups and teachers were activated under the name of Museum of Geography (although the Geography Department had already begun to offer educational activities in 2002). In three years, thanks to the hiring of a professional in geographic education, the number of pupils involved quadrupled (from 500 to 2000), while the area of origin of the schools progressively spread beyond the province of Padua. This all happened before the museum’s actual inauguration (Varotto et al., 2020): somehow, the museum was already building its own community, becoming a point of reference for geographic education in the region and a lively place where knowledge is produced and shared, before its official birth.

The three work directions successfully led to the recognition by the University Center for Museums, which formally included the Museum

of Geography as the 12th university museum in 2017. The same year the architectural studio *Amuse* presented the executive exhibition design. The following year, the necessary funds were allocated by the University Administration Board. Finally, on 3<sup>rd</sup> December 2019, the first Museum of Geography in Italy was inaugurated.

#### 4. The Museum's collections: material legacy and intangible connections

The tangible collections of the Museum of Geography represent the material legacy of geography's 150-year academic presence at the University of Padua. If, at first, the purchase of material aids was mainly led by educational needs, the acquisitions soon also started to involve tools related to research. The constitutional process of this material heritage reflects the evolution of the method of conceiving and practicing geographic teaching and research at the University of Padua, with several intangible connections.

The almost 300 wall maps preserved by the museum faithfully recount the kind of geography taught in Padua over the years. Those purchased before the establishment of the Chair of Physical Geography reveal an active, articulated teaching program that involved historical, political, astronomical, and physical geography, as well as ethnographic themes. After 1903, human geographers left the purchase of physical wall maps mainly to their colleagues in the Faculty of Science, favoring instead the acquisition of economic and anthropic maps<sup>5</sup>. After World War II, the number of wall maps dedicated to single countries increased, probably in connection to the nature of monographic courses; many others focused both on Italian anthropic and physical aspects.

Globes were also typical teaching tools. The museum hosts eight of them: five were bought

<sup>5</sup> The preserved maps include the 1856 historical wall atlas by Carl Anton Bretschneider, the 1871 edition of the oro-hydrographical maps of the continents by Emil von Sydow, an 1874 physical version of the famous *Chart of the World* by Herrmann Berghaus and four maps of the ancient world by Heinrich Kiepert published in the 1870ies. For more details on the collections, see Gallanti, 2020.

by the two geographical institutes at the beginning of the 20th century from German publishers, including a 68 cm standing relief globe by Ernst Schotte. This today welcomes visitors in front of the entrance of the actual museum, as a geographical symbol par excellence<sup>6</sup>. The remaining three are antique 17th century globes whose presence is not explained on any inventory document. These consist of a 68 cm celestial-terrestrial pair that bears the signature of Willem Janszoon Blaeu (1571–1638)<sup>7</sup>, and the third is a celestial globe published in Rome in 1695 by Domenico De Rossi, who had bought the original 1636 plates by Matthäus Greuter. The last three have all undergone restoration over recent years, made possible thanks to the financial support of several donors who committed to sustaining the upcoming museum<sup>8</sup>.

The museum has also preserved a collection of 28 relief models produced between 1888 and 1922. All the main Italian makers of that time are represented: Claudio Cherubini and Domenico Locchi, each with two pieces, including the only surviving example of the *Morainic Amphitheatre of Garda Lake*, and Amedeo Aureli, whose nine pieces attest to a special relationship with Padua. The collection also includes three relief models by the German firm Krantz, the *Euganean Hills* by Giuseppe Stegagno, and the military models of Montello and the Asiago Plateau, both donated after the Great War. However, the most important one is certainly the relief model of the Swiss Alps by Charles Perron, which can be seen as the only completed part of the 1:100,000 terrestrial globe conceived by the French geographer Elisée Reclus for the 1900 World's Fair in Paris (Alavoine-Muller, 2003). Having been part of a project aimed at promoting peaceful and

<sup>6</sup> The other four consist of an 80 cm standing globe depicting the world traffic routes by Heintich Kiepert, a terrestrial-celestial table pair by Ernst Schotte, and a 33 terrestrial globe originally included in Adolf Mang's *Universal Apparat* (Stuttgart, 1910 ca.).

<sup>7</sup> The terrestrial globe, though, is incomplete.

<sup>8</sup> Almost 50 private donors participated in the dedicated crowdfunding campaign, among which the DiSSGeA Department itself and important donors such as Lions Club *Gattamelata* and Banca di Credito Cooperativo Patavina.



respectful cohabitation of the world, it has been turned today into a highly symbolic screen for the projection and negotiation of universal geographical values within the narrative of the Hall of Metaphors (Figure 2).



Figure 2. The projection on the relief model of Swiss Alps in the Hall of Metaphors (Photo: M. Pistore).

An archive of 20,000 photographs is also part of the museum's collection (Rossetto, 2005). Some of these were specifically bought for educational purposes, including the 166 surviving glass plates by Theodor Benzinger acquired by the two geographical institutes in 1912 and recently digitized. Another group includes photographs originally kept in the private archives of professors and donated by their heirs upon their death. The main core, however, was produced by the professors themselves during fieldwork.

Born to ensure the adequate training to future teachers, as geography gained in authority among sciences, the associated university institutes also became well-equipped research centers. Unfortunately, protracted outdoor use exposed instrumental equipment to losses and breakages; for instance, of the very first tools bought by Marinelli in the 1880s, only a compass survives. Moreover, of the rich set of tools belonging to the Institute of Physical Geography the museum only inherited an Abney level and pocket microscope, while the major collection had passed, in 1942, to the Institute of Geodesy and Geophysics. Together with the progressive increase in research lines and scholars after World War II, this explains why

the Museum's instrumental collection includes relatively recent items. Overall, it consists of 150 pieces, linked to various research fields, including meteorology, glaciology, cartography, topography, and seismology.

The museum's original collections also comprise about 30,000 maps, including around 2,500 pre-20th century ones, approximately 70 atlases and books with fine cartographical equipment edited before 1900, 105 lithological samples, and important documental archives referring to the work of the physical geographers Luigi De Marchi and Bruno Castiglioni.

These tangible components are integrated with intangible heritage including the teaching and research practices that over time have become typical of Paduan geography, such as, for example, teaching excursions that have involved geography students since the 1880s as an essential opportunity for teaching direct and critical observation of landscapes (Gallanti and Donadelli, 2020).

### 5. "Explore Measure Tell": an engaging idea of geography

After the (re-)discovery and cataloguing phase, the actual museum design phase started. The Scientific Commission agreed on the idea of a museum whose narrative should combine the enhancement of past local scientific experience, and expertise, with an overview of the "public" role of geography as a discipline (Comitato Scientifico delle Giornate della Geografia, 2018; Bertocin et al., 2019) addressing most of the crucial current issues, from climate change and the Anthropocene to migrations and borders, with an extra focus on the social engagement dimension, which is at the heart of the Third Mission of Universities (Donadelli et al., 2018a, 2018b). This was thus a challenging project, with no similar models to deal with and take inspiration from, either in Italy or abroad. However, experts in different scientific, technical, and artistic fields were included in the project and provided their expertise for what would soon become a collective adventure.

The design phase also included the choice of a logo and a slogan (Figure 3), the most immediate and evocative elements through

which the museum would present itself to its potential audience. The logo was inspired by traditional world maps over two hemispheres, and symbolically recomposes into a symmetric unity the complexity of the world, also evoking the interaction between human and physical geography, and the broader dialectic between natural and social sciences. Around it, a series of concentric double circles suggests the idea of observation over several scales and depths, which is typical of geography (Varotto et al., 2020).



Figure 3. The Museum's logo and slogan (Courtesy of the Museum of Geography).

The slogan, “Explore Measure Tell” is a call to action, an invitation to become involved in the practices that characterize the geographer's work and consequently to embrace critical and innovative ways of seeing and living in the world. “Explore” recalls, of course, the explorative phase that characterized geography in the nineteenth century, when geography at Padua first began. Expanded into a general attitude toward intellectual curiosity, it is the basis for both the nomothetic approach of geography, oriented toward the measuring of phenomena (“Measure”), and the idiographic one, oriented toward the construction of narratives and metaphors that give meaning to the world (“Tell”). The three words are recalled through the themes on which the three main museum halls are focused: the “Hall of Exploration,” the “Hall of Measures,” and the “Hall of Metaphors.”

## 6. A (virtual) tour to the Museum

The visiting experience begins by ascending the staircase that leads to the museum's main floor. Here, visitors' idea of geography is immediately evoked as they face some of the stereotypes that might have affected their perception of the discipline since their school days as dry and only able to deal with objective and immutable phenomena (Figure 4). Likewise the geographer encountered by the *Little Prince* during his travel across the universe, visitors may expect geography to deal only with stable and immobile objects: “A geographer is a scholar who knows the location of all the seas, rivers, towns, mountains, and deserts [...] It is very rarely that a mountain changes its position. It is very rarely that an ocean empties itself of its waters. We write of eternal things” (De Saint-Exupéry, 1943, pp. 62-63).



Figure 4. The timeless objects of Geography most people expect (Photo: G. Donadelli).

Without entirely leaving behind knowledge of positions and dimensions, which are necessary for a proper understanding of the complex phenomena dealt with by geography, the stairway's ascent offers visitors the opportunity to progress toward a different idea of geography that seeks to discover what is moving among these apparently fixed elements.

As already mentioned, the museum is organized over three main halls. The first one is the Hall of Measures (Figure 5), and is dedicated to the measurement of climate change. The topic strongly connects Padua's long research

tradition on climate and ice and the pressing relevance of global warming. Indeed, the first scholar to take the Chair of Physical Geography, Luigi De Marchi (1857-1936), promoted in 1928 a permanent international commission for the study of climate change in historical times (De Marchi and Negri, 1928). While exhibiting measurement tools connected to this research

tradition, the hall's narrative invites visitors to reflect on how the evolution of climatic and glacial phenomena has been affected by human activities both by showing the progressive retreat of the Marmolada glacier on a relief model and by representing Italy in the aftermath of all ice caps melting with its surface reduced by over 20%.



Figure 5. The Hall of Measures dedicated to prof. Luigi De Marchi (Photo: G. Donadelli).

After intersecting, thanks to the direct contribution of Prof. Marina Bertoincin, Prof. Massimo De Marchi, and Prof. Paolo Mozzi, the reflections on the physical aspects of the problem and those connected to the social, cultural, and economic domains in three areas of the world (Lake Chad, the Amazon, and the Mediterranean basin), the narration engages visitors to play their part in reversing the course of change by exploring 15 small doors revealing as many concrete actions they can easily undertake.

The visit continues to the “Hall of Exploration,” which is a physical and imaginative dimension without which geography would simply not exist. On the one hand, the room recalls the role of past explorers operating

at the University of Padua. These are represented by the material and photographic memories of the De Agostini Expedition to Tierra del Fuego in the austral summer of 1955/56 (Morandini, 1957). On the other hand, the room opens to a broader understanding of “exploration”, giving space to a dense geographical web built up through daily practices, inexhaustible curiosity for the relationships between phenomena, and continuous attention to far and near places, with a few inseparable companions: the rucksack, map, compass, notebook, and camera, all displayed in the room. Knowing of the necessity to decolonize this term, the museum intends exploration as an inclusive attitude of curiosity and respect for all types of diversity. In this



sense, the other side of the room is dedicated to the “explorations of geography,” namely the research lines developed at the University of Padua by the geographers of yesterday, today, and tomorrow; a large touchscreen allows visitors both to browse the vast tangible legacy preserved by the museum archives and to follow the spatial and historical development of the research on a global scale. Next to it, a mosaic of 20 revolving tiles reveals the research issues currently faced in Padua: water and development in Africa and at the Po Delta; glaciers, global warming and rise of sea levels; environmental conflicts in the Amazon forest; landscape reconnaissance and preservation issues; cartographical representation and its cultural implications; narrative geographies; soundscapes; geographical teaching, etc. Other lines of research have emerged since the opening of the museum like geography of tourism, mobility and humanities, art and geography and others can be suggested by visitors. The old library files form a physical background for the future-geography-keyword cloud, as imagined by the community of Italian geographers in a survey launched by the museum in 2019, before it opened (Figure 6). Several of these keywords, such as “land-grabbing,” “spatial justice,” “migration,” and “globalization,” critically face today the long-term effects of colonial policy, to which a certain kind of geographical exploration provided in the past scientific support and political justification.

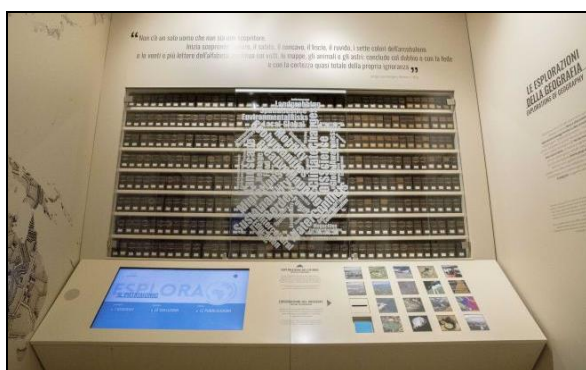


Figure 6. The future-geography-keyword cloud in the Hall of Exploration (Photo: F. Milanese).

The third museum hall focuses on the process of geographical knowledge transfer; that is, the

“narration” by which every act of geographical knowledge involves space while trying to give it a meaning. It is named “Hall of Metaphor” after Giuseppe Dematteis’s book *Le Metafore della Terra*, in which the scholar identifies in metaphors the path towards geographic critical thought, in contrast to an objective and unquestionable idea of the discipline (Dematteis, 1985). A voice-over accompanies visitors through an immersive multisensory itinerary made up of lights, images, videos, sounds, and scents, some of whom are directly projected on the above mentioned relief model by Reclus. The narration is built around three significant items of the museum’s collection that are displayed in the room as “portals” through which key concepts of contemporary geography are made accessible: the *Borgia World Map* in a 1797 engraving for “place”, Charles Perron’s *Relief Model of the Swiss Alps* (created between 1895 and 1900) for “territory”, and the terminological chart that introduced the *Atlas mural Vidal Lablache*, that the Museum holds in an early 20th century edition, for “landscape”. The visit ends with a direct invitation to visitors to allow geographical ideas and actions to enter their everyday lives in a concrete way; for this, they can pick up a card that assigns them a geographical “mission” that can be accomplished outside the museum.

Even if these three rooms represent the main core of the exhibition space, the museum has a diffused attitude, and a visit can expand to other spaces throughout the palace as well as beyond its walls. In the Library of Geography, for example, the collection of relief models is displayed, recently enriched by the loan of five historical geological items from the exhibits of the Museum of Geology. The visit can even expand outdoors, along via del Santo, with the interactive audio-tour *Polyplaces*, imagined as a walking tour to explore the street, coming to know its history and inhabitants. Coming back to Wollemborg Palace’s indoor spaces, in the highly ornate Hall of Music where the standing globes are displayed, temporary exhibitions are frequently hosted. These often involve items from the two outstanding biblio-cartographical donations received by the Museum in 2021 from Armando Morbiato, namely a set of 39 atlases and cartographically relevant books, including

the original Latin edition of the *Nuremberg Chronical* (1493), 23 travel books, which chronologically begin with the 1713 *Reise Nach Italien* by Maximilien Mission, and 289 maps, engraved over a period of 400 years.

Finally, the last flight of the main stairs, where we started our visit with the quote from fantastic Little Prince's adventures, hosts an illustrated map by the cartoonist Isacco Saccoman that is an example of a new way of interpreting geography and cartography. Through dialog with art and other creative languages, it enables shape to be given to the subjective dimension of one's relationship with the world and stimulates the ability to imagine possible futures. The map shows a possible configuration for the Pangea Proxima, or Nova Pangea, the expected supercontinent that is a result of continental drift over the next 250 million years (Williams and Nield, 2007). Figuring the future, it shows one of the countless possibilities and perspectives that could have been drawn: a huge, unique continent on which humanity will be called to live together, overcoming profound cultural, social, economic, and religious distances and relying on a shared set of fundamental values, embodied on the map by the toponyms. The future, though, is neither written nor drawn. New values will be chosen, and new cities will be founded and named, starting from the nameless one at the center of the map. Asking visitors to write down their own values, the map symbolically involves them in the participatory process of sketching a shared vision of the future (Figure 7).



Figure 7. The “Nova Pangea” map by Isacco Saccoman (Photo: F. Milanese).

## 7. Opened and immediately locked down: the museum's challenging beginnings

The museum was inaugurated on 3rd December 2019. Between this date and mid-February 2020 – just over three months – it had hosted 1500 visitors and was expecting 225 more school classes from all over Italy by June 2020, amounting to approximately 5000 students (Donadelli et al., 2021). Then the lockdown came and, as for every other museum in the world, all plans were shattered. Attempts to invent new solutions to feed the relationship with its just-met or about-to-meet audience were particularly challenging, but in the end, a series of online initiatives was organized and completed in order to keep on engaging a wide community. Social campaigns were undertaken as a single museum or together with other university museums: one example is the post series called *La mia mente viaggia* (“My mind travels”), with a collection of photos and short texts from the museum's community on Instagram and Facebook, representing the places where people were imagining to travel in a period of reduced mobility or forced immobility during the lockdown. Another initiative was #Camcaffè, thorough which significant items from the university museums and collections were presented on the web by means of a series of short videos<sup>9</sup>. In the same period, a web portal was launched in collaboration with the Italian Association of Geography Teachers (AIIG), dedicated to “geographical missions,”<sup>10</sup> namely a series of daily geographic tasks to be carried out at home, which stimulate observation and creative geographical thinking. Despite the lockdown impeded access to the museum's spaces, online educational laboratories and guided tours were organized for the schools, in order to move the museum in the (often virtual) classrooms.

The need to start with a strong attention towards social media communication, determined by the pandemic conditions and the need to keep on engaging a growing community,

<sup>9</sup> To learn more about the initiative: <https://www.musei.unipd.it/it/scopriraccolte/camcaffè>

<sup>10</sup> To put yourself to the test with a geographical mission: <https://www.missionigeografiche.it/>

has left a mark, and the museum's relationship with its web audience is now distinctive in comparison with other academic social media profiles. This has been boosted more recently with new social media campaigns, such as the one that took place in Spring 2021 that aimed to enhance the history of the AIIG journal, *Ambiente, Società, Territorio – Geografia nelle Scuole* (“geography in the schools”), entirely preserved by the museum and designed by three interns who invented creative ways to actualize eight of the geographical questions asked by the readers in the 1950s and 1960s as, for example, what is the tallest building in the world? How many glaciers are there in Italy? or How can the shape of the Dolomites be explained?<sup>11</sup> (Figure 8).



Figure 8. Trainees at work with the AIIG journal (Photo: G. Donadelli).

Moreover, a citizen science campaign was launched in Summer 2021, by asking the museum's social community to re-photograph 13 places in the Euganean Hills that had originally been photographed by Paduan geographers in the 1920s. In Summer 2022 another intern from the degree course in Landscape studies carried out a social campaign titled *Meraviglie nell'armadio* (“Wonders in the closet”) dedicated to her discovery in Museum photographic archive of a series of Japanese photographs dating back to the 1960ies. The

<sup>11</sup> For more details about the project visit the AIIG website: <https://www.aiig.it/attivita/progetti/8-doman-de/>.

success of the initiatives, together with general interest in the museum's activities, led to a significant increase in the number of followers of the museum's social profiles<sup>12</sup>, sustained by a regular Newsletter with around 1300 subscriptions.

## 8. The museum's dissemination activities: taking geography beyond its walls

The museum is also a laboratory for experimenting with new ways for co-producing, teaching, and sharing geographical knowledge. Here, we will mention only a few of the many initiatives coordinated and hosted by the museum over the years: these were often sustained by a constantly expanding network of partners, and growing collaborations with institutions, associations and festivals variously engaging geographical topics and issues, among which Comitato Glaciologico Italiano, Touring Club Italiano, Fondo per l'Ambiente italiano, Legambiente. The editorial collection *Mappamondi*, focused on the dissemination of topics concerning the Museum heritage and narrative, was launched already in 2020: the first volume is dedicated to an overall presentation of the Museum concept (Varotto et al., 2020), while the second compares the alpine glaciers photographed by dr. Bruno Castiglioni in the 1920s to their current condition (Baccolo, 2021). Other publications disseminate geographical knowledge through creative spatial imagination: indeed, both the fictional journey told in *Viaggio nell'Italia dell'Antropocene* (Pievani and Varotto, 2021) and the illustrated book for children *La Geografia spiegata ai bambini* (literally “geography explained to children”) (Peterle, 2020) make use of “geographical imagination” (Dematteis, 2021) and illustrations to address creatively current issues and discuss key-concepts in an accessible and engaging way.

<sup>12</sup> For example, the followers of the museum's Facebook page passed from 2836 at the end of 2019 to 4010 at the end of 2020, amounting to an increase of 1174 in the first pandemic year; by the end of 2021, there were 5695 followers, after an increase of 1381. By mid-2022, there were 6258 followers, following a six-month increase of 563 followers.



Over the years, the museum's tangible and intangible heritage has been expanding, turning the museum collection itself into a lively matter. The museum is, in fact, attracting the attention of individuals and institutions who, for various reasons, hold geo-cartographical funds that they decide to share with a wider public. These donations are driving the museum's research activities and were recently also attracted by the mobility topic that, since 2018, characterizes a main line of research in the DiSSGeA (Varotto and Gallanti, 2023). For example, in Spring 2022, the museum organized and hosted a workshop of national significance dedicated to the effective mobility of cultural digital objects on the Internet. In autumn, it will launch its first virtual exhibition in both Italian and English: *Travelling Maps*, realized with the collaboration of the librarians of the University Library System. The relationship between mobilities and maps is studied by retracing the routes of some of the atlases donated by Armando Morbiato<sup>13</sup>. Sustained by the project of excellence "Mobility & the Humanities" of the DiSSGeA, and part of a broader third mission project called "Moving Knowledge/Mobility Expo"<sup>14</sup>, *Travelling Maps* represents a first attempt to create a digital repository of alternative thematic itineraries to explore the collection and make it accessible remotely, even to an international audience.

The museum has recently implemented its activities around the art-geography nexus, encountering a wider national and international reflection about the role of creative methods and languages in producing and communicating geographical content in more effective ways: if art-geography collaborations seem to experiment alternative ways of conducting research and teaching geography in pedagogical contexts, they also provide museums with the opportunity to engage wider audiences (Hawkins, 2020; Jellis, 2015). One example is the diffused geo-artistic exhibition *Street Geography*: coordinated by Giada Peterle, the exhibition was realized in 2018 in the city of Padua through the

<sup>13</sup> Visit *Traveling Maps*: <https://mostre.cab.unipd.it/travelling-maps/>.

<sup>14</sup> Learn more about the third mission project "Moving Knowledge/Mobility Expo" and its related initiatives: <https://www.mobilityandhumanities.it/social-impact/mobility-expo/>.

collaboration between three young artists and three geographers, and the mediation of the curators of the Progetto Giovani Office of the Municipality of Padua (Peterle, 2019). They developed a project of public art in public space called *Street Geography* revolving around three key-concepts in geography, "mobility", "neighborhoods," and "waterways". The project led to the installation of three public artworks. In collaboration with the museum, a series of guided tours were offered to very different groups in terms of age, origin and geographical interests. Similarly, in 2022 the museum was one of the main partners of the festival *Lifes Loves Landscape*, hosting a musical reading by Andrea Staid and Nicola Camera on the need to reconceptualise our idea of "home", a context-specific art installation on the relationship between body and water, a dance and drawing performance related to anthropic forms of "dwelling", and a piano concert at Palazzo Wollemborg (Figure 9).



Figure 8. The dance performance during the *Lifes Loves Landscape* festival (Courtesy of Giardini dell'Arena).

In terms of exhibitions, in autumn 2022 the museum hosted two of them, both related to mobility. The first, inaugurated on the 21st September on the occasion of the T2M Annual International Conference, was called *Rabbits & Rails15* and is a mobile exhibition realized by the international project Public Transport as Public Space in European Cities. After a stop in

<sup>15</sup> Visit the online version of *Rabbits and Rails*: <https://putspace.eu/rabbits-and-rails/>.



Brussels and at the Road Museum of Estonia, the exhibition in the shape of a yellow bus arrived at the Padua museum before leaving for the prestigious Deutsches Museum in Munich. The second exhibition was related to the project Padova UniverCity and officially opened on the 25th October. It presented the flows of people and students and the changing cartographies of academic spaces of the University of Padua over its 800-year history in the city.

Indeed, the activities of the museum's third mission have recently been strengthened by the vast amount of initiatives that the University of Padua has been dedicating to the enhancement of its cultural heritage in the occasion of its 800<sup>th</sup> anniversary (1222–2022). Among others, of strategic importance is the Grand Tour of Science<sup>16</sup>, which includes the Museum of Geography in a tour of eight extremely relevant university cultural seats, including the oldest university Botanical Garden and the Palazzo del Bo, historic seat of the University. For the occasion, a two-language audio-guide to the museum has been developed. The museum was also promoting eight geocaching events, focused on places in the city related to research activities. These GPS-based treasure hunts involved around 800 people, among which students and academic staff, citizens, international students and students of the secondary schools. In the last years the museum has been organizing many similar geocaching activities to combine spatial awareness with a playful approach to geography. Finally, in line with the long-lasting glaciological studies run at the University of Padua, and witnessed by the many instruments and testimonies preserved in its collection, the museum has been organizing every summer since 2019 a participatory glaciological campaign to register the state of health of the Marmolada Glacier<sup>17</sup> (Figure 10). This glacier, indeed, represents a privileged spot to keep trace of the measurable effects of climate change.

<sup>16</sup> Learn more about the Grand Tour of Science: <https://800anniunipd.it/en/progetti/permanent-legacy/i-musei/grandtour/>.

<sup>17</sup> To learn more about the latest edition of the participatory Glaciological Campaign visit: <https://www.montagneinrete.it/eventi/al-via-la-quarta-edizione-della-campagna-glaciologica-partecipata>.



Figure 9. Participatory survey of the front of the Marmolada glacier (Photo: G. Donadelli).

### 9. Education activities: workshops, learning adventures, teacher training

The educational goal has been at the center of the museum programming from the very beginning. Therefore, among all the activities, the workshops dedicated to school classes from nursery school to high school occupy the lion's share and, to do so, a call for museum educators is launched annually to recruit motivated staff to be trained and assigned to conduct the workshops. In 2002, an innovative move by the Professor of Didactics of Geography, Lorena Rocca, directly involved the first nursery and primary schools, beginning a collaboration that, with the partnership of the Padua and Veneto sections of AIIG, has progressively reduced the huge gap that has for a long time separated geographical education at schools and universities. The importance of this experience, which has involved an increasing number of geographers and technicians in the department, is certainly another force that effectively influenced the department's decision to undertake the museum project (Varotto et al., 2020).

The museum proposes teaching activities designed to combine the most up-to-date pedagogical theories with direct experience in schools in order to reinforce the role of geography in the Italian education system (the subject is often perceived in schools as dry and boring) and to contribute to the development of a culture of science in schools.

The teaching proposal has been boosted and refined since the 2017/18 school year and uses items from the museum's collections as educational media. The approach consists of three kinds of activities: teaching workshops, guided tours, and learning adventures.

Teaching workshops are the most consolidated proposals within the educational offering. They involve school groups of all ages, and take place inside the museum, in the dedicated Discovery Room (since the pandemic, also occasionally at schools and online). Based on PhD dissertations (Donadelli, 2017) and master's degree theses, they combine enhancement of the museum's collection with an attempt to facilitate the learning of some of the geographical topics that a survey conducted among Italian teachers had revealed to be the hardest to teach, from cardinal points through to map reading (Figure 11). As classes often come in pairs, and the space is not big enough to host two classes at the same time, the museum proposes workshops or museum visits with the opportunity to visit its nearby environs using an audio-guide that aims to enrich the geographic experience in seemingly ordinary places and also thanks to a series of geographical missions that give users the opportunity to meet some interesting territorial actors.



Figure 10. School students in the Discovery Room (Photo: G. Donadelli).

Finally, learning adventures are immersive experiences in geographic education (Figure 12). They take place outdoors and represent the museum's most advanced training proposal,

which combines enhancing heritage and fieldwork activity. They are characterized by teamwork, and by the fun application of geographical skills in places extensively studied by Paduan geographers such as the Asiago plateau or the Venice Lagoon. While delving into different themes, all proposals stimulate the development of observation ("Explore"), reflection ("Measure"), and re-elaboration ("Tell").



Figure 11. Learning adventure in the Asiago Plateau (Photo: G. Donadelli).

Beyond the museum's vital relationship with schools is that with teachers who previously studied at the University of Padua and/or have turned to it for refresher training. The already mentioned partnership with the AIIG, whose strong support to the museum project led to an official collaboration agreement in March 2019, was strategic in consolidating over time the relationship between the university and the world of education by means of the constant offer of conferences, seminars, and workshops. This has enabled an integrated training system to be built whereby university and schools of the territory are no longer distant educational spaces but conscious partners in a complete vertical curriculum aimed at promoting the widest geographic awareness among coming generations. This legacy has been entirely accepted by the museum, which currently hosts teacher training activities.

## 10. Future steps: building an open “home” for geography

The museum continues to develop programs for the future. At present, it has had a significant impact with its outreach to teachers and students. Engaging young people in experiencing the contributions that geographic knowledge and skills make to their abilities to recognize and solve current and future social and environmental issues has become a legacy of the museum.

The great interest on the part of schoolteachers for quality proposals in the field of geographical education is confirmed by the constantly increasing number of schools that respond to the museum’s educational offer. The next goal is to turn the Museum of Geography into a reference point at national and international levels for the experimentation, study, and promotion of geographic education for children and young people. To do this, in the near future, its staff will work to consolidate and expand the network of collaborations already in

place, to diversify the geographical topics involved, the methodologies used, and the creative languages engaged with a growing dialogue with art-based methods and artists, and to create a scientific–didactic laboratory aimed at widespread dissemination of the actual experiences. The museum’s “teaching” goal moves beyond traditional educational contexts and aims to become a place of encounter between disparate disciplines, experts, citizens and transgenerational audiences interested in the co-production and sharing of geographical knowledge and spatial awareness, as significant components of society.

More broadly speaking, the Museum’s plan for the future is to strengthen its role as an open “home” for geographers and geography lovers; as a research and experimentation center on public geography issues; as a cultural hub for geographic tangible and intangible heritage; as a landmark for schools and associations; as a place where critical thinking and geographic education are promoted as fundamental skills to face the present and future challenges.

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