

# Showcasing Japan A Journey of Japanese Identity Through Archaeology and Ancient Art Exhibitions in Italy

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**Abstract** To what extent does the narrative of Japan's prehistorical origins matter to Italy? In the second half of the twentieth century, Palazzo delle Esposizioni in Rome hosted two significant exhibitions dedicated to Japanese archaeology and ancient art: *Tesori dell'Arte Giapponese* in 1958 and *Il Giappone prima dell'Occidente* in 1995. Both displays provided Italian visitors with an unparalleled framework to engage with early artistic manifestations of the archipelago known today as Japan. Built on a critical analysis of the prehistoric and protohistoric artefacts from the Jōmon to Kofun periods selected for the Italian audience, this paper examines the active application of narrative discourse on Japan's identity by the Japanese government in Italy. Still, it also sheds light on the presence of Japanese archaeology and art in Italian public and private collections throughout the twentieth century. The analysis delves into the textual and visual presentation of exhibits, examining both the venue and catalogues. These sources offer insights into potential instances of orientalism or self-orientalism, revealing a narrative closely tied to stereotypical views. The investigation unravels aspects of Japan's past emphasised in diplomatic shows, evolving alongside ground-breaking archaeological discoveries in post-war Japan.

**Keywords** Japanese archaeology. Identity. Japanese art. Italo-Japanese cultural exchange. Exhibition Studies.

**Summary** 1 Introduction. – 2 Archaeology and Ancient Art of Japan in Italy. – 3 Japan in Palazzo delle Esposizioni. – 4 Narrating the Japanese Identity in Archaeological and Ancient Art Exhibits in Italy. – 5 Conclusions.



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## 1 Introduction

In the latter half of the twentieth century, Palazzo delle Esposizioni in Rome hosted two large-scale exhibitions featuring archaeology and ancient art from Japan. *Tesori dell'Arte Giapponese* (Treasures of Japanese Art) constituted the inaugural exhibition that the Italian audience had the opportunity to appreciate by the close of 1958. In the initial decade following the conclusion of World War II, both nations formerly belonging to the Axis Powers underwent introspection and political adjustments. Concurrently, a miraculous and swift economic regeneration provided a measure of relief from the lingering war trauma persisting in both societies. Simultaneously, the disintegration of the myth surrounding the imperial family in Japan was succeeded by ground-breaking discoveries in the field of prehistoric archaeology.

Nevertheless, it was not until 1995, with a gap of nearly forty years, that another major exhibition titled *Il Giappone prima dell'Occidente* (Japan Before the West) was organised in Italy at the same venue as in 1958. While the content of the second exhibition displayed outwardly analogous features to the first one, the contextual backdrop significantly differed in the two instances. By 1995, the year of the second exhibition, Japan had already experienced the bursting of its economic bubble at the close of the 1980s, plunging the country into the so-called 'Lost Decade'.<sup>1</sup> Emperor Hirohito passed away in 1989, and with the dissolution of the Soviet Union, Japan also entered the post-Cold War era. Furthermore, noteworthy archaeological discoveries in Japan, such as the identification of the Sannai-Maruyama Site in 1992, altered the discourse on Japanese prehistory.

A palpable shift is discernible between the 1958 and 1995 exhibitions in the approach to presenting archaeology and ancient art, influencing narratives of Japanese identity. Despite disparities in descriptions and the showcased artefacts, both exhibitions serve as pivotal junctures where archaeology and art converge, crafting narratives about Japan and conveying its identity to Italian audiences. However, it is essential to note that while the so-called artworks contribute to the translation of Japanese aesthetics, archaeological

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**1** Japan experienced an economic bubble between 1986 and 1991, primarily in financial assets but also in real estate. The collapse of this bubble in 1992 resulted in the country's economic stagnation throughout the 1990s, a period commonly referred to as the 'Lost Decade'.

artefacts exhibited beyond national borders bear the crucial responsibility of narrating the (pre)historical past of the Japanese people.<sup>2</sup>

Identity in archaeology is a complex and dynamic concept, challenging rigid confinement to stable traits inherent in individuals, as experiences play a transformative role (Meskell, Preucel 2004, 122). Beyond intrinsic traits, social constructs significantly shape identity, expanding it to encompass the perception of 'who we are' within society, surpassing internal self-perception (Schwartz, Vignoles, Luyckx 2011a, 3). The social identification process involves recognising affiliation to a specific group, constituting a vital aspect of the conceptual framework wherein self-identification as a group member is central (3). Comparative evaluations with other groups follow, prompting the need for clear distinctions, sometimes achieved through material culture, as a means of delineating one's group from others (Spears 2011, 203). Material culture, in this context, serves as a 'symbolic' marker facilitating the archaeological identification of associated social groups (Shelach 2009, 77). Affiliation with a particular identity also manifests through objectification, seen as a means of "self-knowledge for individuals and groups" (Tilley 2006, 60). Members of a specific identity group recognise objectification elements as integral to their shared identity. It is, therefore, essential to understand the choices made in the selection of archaeological artefacts exhibited beyond national borders that have the crucial task of narrating the Japanese people's past and their identity.

This paper aims primarily to uncover the story of two historical exhibitions, almost forgotten today both in Japan and Italy. Based on a critical analysis of the archaeological objects selected for the two major exhibitions in 1958 and 1995, the following text will try to demonstrate how Japanese identity has been constructed and conveyed to Italian audiences in different contexts. Concurrently, the paper will delineate the presence of Japanese archaeology and ancient art

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**2** Shortly before the 1958 exhibition, significant changes occurred regarding legislation concerning the protection of cultural properties. As demonstrated by Failla (2004), concerning the safeguarding of cultural properties, there was a widespread apprehension during the aftermath of the war that many artefacts would be dispersed or lost amidst the chaotic post-war period (2004, 103). Consequently, in 1949, the Division for the Protection of Cultural Properties was established. Merely a year later, in 1950, the new *Bunkazai Hogo Hō* 文化財保護法 (Law for the Protection of Cultural Properties) was enacted. This legislation introduced two new categories to the roster of protected items: 'intangible cultural properties' (*mukeni bunkazai* 無形文化財) and 'buried cultural properties' (*maizō bunkazai* 埋蔵文化財). Furthermore, the law aimed to consolidate the "system of cultural properties", ensuring the prompt and effective implementation of the new norms and regulations. It also instituted the Committee for the Preservation of Cultural Properties (*Bunkazai Hogo Inkaei* 文化財保護委員会) as an adjunct to the Ministry of Education, comprising an advisory board of experts in cultural property preservation (Failla 2004, 103). This shows that from the post-World War II period onwards, including the 1958 exhibition, there was a greater focus on the cultural and identity significance of pre-protolithic objects.

in Italy since the last century, along with the role played by Palazzo delle Esposizioni in showcasing Japan.

## 2 Archaeology and Ancient Art of Japan in Italy

Starting under the regime of the Kingdom of Italy (1861-1946), individual interest in Japan began to manifest itself among passionate art collectors. The early collections of Japanese art in Italy formed by those individuals, among which Edoardo Chiossone (1833-98) and Enrico di Borbone (1851-1905) are the most well-known, gave rise to museums towards the end of the nineteenth century.

Originally, Edoardo Chiossone was an artist invited by the Japanese government to contribute his skills as a drawing and engraving master at the Tokyo School of Art.<sup>3</sup> Actively participating in Japan's artistic and technological development program oriented towards the West, he began collecting art and craft objects and items from the pre- and protohistoric period in 1875. The collection, bequeathed by will to the Ligustica Academy of Fine Arts and the city of Genoa, Chiossone's hometown, was transferred to Genoa after his death and presented to the public in 1905. A building dedicated to the collection was built between 1953 and 1970 and opened in 1971 as the Museo d'Arte Orientale Edoardo Chiossone, as it is known today in Genoa.<sup>4</sup> The Chiossone Museum in Genoa organised several exhibitions on *ukiyo-e* 浮世絵 from 1971 to 1976, showcasing its extensive collection and supporting various research and studies in this field (Caterina, Tamburello 1978, 11).

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**3** Chiossone was invited to Japan through the mission of Iwakura Tomomi (1825-83), alongside the painter Antonio Fontanesi, the sculptor Vincenzo Ragusa, and the architect Giovanni Vincenzo Cappelletti (Failla 2004, 79). The Iwakura Mission is regarded as the first diplomatic tool for political and cultural internationalisation, as well as being the first to draw attention to 'Western' models for the interpretation of ancient and contemporary art (79).

**4** Muto 1961, 20-1; Caterina, Tamburello 1977, 28-9; Failla 2006, 194-5; Kumakura, Kreiner 2010, 642. In the Chiossone Museum's archaeology collection, the following items are currently on display:

Yayoi period: halberd head (Middle/Late Yayoi period), three spearheads (Middle Yayoi period), fifteen *magatama* 勾玉 (Yayoi/Kofun period), necklace of *kudatama* 管玉 (Yayoi/Kofun period);

Kofun period: bronze ornament for horse tack (ring with three bells, from Eta Funayama Kofun, Nagomi, Kumamoto Prefecture, fifth-sixth CE), bronze mirror with five bells fifth-sixth CE), knob of a ring-handle sword depicting a dragon head (sixth-seventh CE), iron sword blade (no date). (All information was provided by Dr. Aurora Canepari of the Chiossone Museum via private correspondence on 22 November 2023. University of Padua MA student Rossella Panarella supervised the objects' dating. At the time of writing this paper, archaeometric analyses are still in progress to determine the precise dating of the bronze objects).

Another important collection is that of Prince Enrico di Borbone-Parma, Count of Bardi. He began acquiring numerous Japanese art objects during a long journey to East Asia, including primarily weapons, lacquers, *netsuke* 印籠, and *inrō* 根付け from the Edo period. Initially housed at Palazzo Vendramin Calergi in Venice, the collection was sold to a Viennese antiquarian after he died in 1906. Many works were subsequently sold to collectors and foreign museums. What remained of the collection until the end of World War I was then assigned to Italy as part of war reparations from Austria. These works found a place in Palazzo Pesaro in Venice, constituting the first and foremost nucleus of the local Museo Orientale, open since 1928 (cf. Kumakura, Kreiner 2010; Boscolo Marchi 2020).

It was at the Weltausstellung in Vienna in 1873 that the Japanese regime first became aware of the need to show art to a European audience, when the Japanese neologism *bijutsu* 美術 (fine arts) was coined to accommodate the systematic categorisation of the World's Fair (cf. Kitazawa 1989). Nevertheless, it was not until the 1897 Venice Biennale – also known as the Second International Art Exhibition – that the Japanese were involved in officially showcasing their art in Italy. To this event, the *Nippon Bijutsu Kyōkai* 日本美術協会 (Japan Fine Art Association) submitted historic and neo-traditional paintings (Adriasola 2017, 212), while the collection of German art dealer Ernst Seeger and numerous *kakemono* 掛け物 owned by Alessandro Fè d'Ostiani were displayed as complementary artworks of the Edo period (Boscolo Marchi 2020, 134). Subsequently, Japan participated in the International Exhibition of Modern Decorative Art in Turin in 1902. Equally important was the exhibition dedicated to Japan in 1908 at the Gabinetto cinese Wunsch in Trieste, open since 1843 and instrumental in shaping the Trieste collection of Japanese objects and prints (Caterina, Tamburello 1977, 27).

The Italian Institute for the Middle and Far East (IsMEO),<sup>5</sup> and the Japanese Cultural Institute were devoted to showing Japanese art in Rome throughout the 1950s and 1960s. One of the most significant

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**5** Founded in 1933 by Giuseppe Tucci with the support of philosopher Giovanni Gentile, the Italian Institute for the Middle and Far East (IsMEO) was created with the primary objective of promoting cultural relations between Italy and Asian countries, initially with a focus on the Indian region. During its activities until the outbreak of World War II, IsMEO organised language courses, teacher exchanges, distributed scholarships, and published periodicals aimed at an educated but non-specialist audience. It also opened a museum of East Asian art, which was interrupted in 1944 due to the war. After resuming activities in 1947, the Institute expanded its scope, organising scientific expeditions to Tibet and Nepal and entering into agreements with various Asian countries for archaeological excavations and monumental restorations. In 1995, due to budgetary reasons, the Institute was merged with the Italian-African Institute, giving rise to the Italian Institute for Africa and the Orient (IsIAO) (IsMEO – Associazione Internazionale di Studi sul Mediterraneo e l'Oriente, <https://www.ismeo.eu/chi-siamo/>).

exhibitions organised by IsMEO was the 1954 show in collaboration with the Municipality of Venice, commemorating the seventh centenary of Marco Polo's birth and featuring works from Europe, the United States, and Japan (*Marco Polo: Celebrazione del settimo centenario della nascita, 1254-1954*, 1954). This show was followed by numerous displays focusing on traditional painting and Japanese prints, including the 1959 exhibition by IsMEO on *suiboku-ga* 水墨画 and *sumi-e* 墨絵, titled *Pittura zen dal secolo XVII al secolo XIX* (Zen Painting from the Seventeenth to the Nineteenth Century), and the 1961 exhibition *Mostra di Gibon Sengai* (Zen Master Gibon Sengai).

Regarding Japanese prints, in the 1950s, the IsMEO organised the first exhibition of Japanese print engravings from the seventeenth to the nineteenth century in collaboration with the National Museum of Tokyo. Later, in 1967 and 1968, further exhibitions were held, sponsored by the Japanese Cultural Institute and presented at the Cabinet of Prints and Drawings of the Uffizi Gallery in Florence. In 1971, another *ukiyo-e* exhibition was organised by the Japanese Cultural Institute in collaboration with the Austrian Cultural Institute in Rome (Istituto Giapponese di Cultura, 1971).

Between 1958 and 1959, a particularly notable event was the exhibition *Tesori dell'Arte Giapponese* at the Palazzo delle Esposizioni in Rome, curated by Emilio Lavagnino and Kawai Yahachi. It assembled various aspects of Japanese art that had never been presented in such an ensemble before. Surprisingly, the same venue hosted two other exhibitions from Japan, in 1930 and 1995. If this venue holds a special place in the history of Japanese art exhibitions in Italy, how has the historical relationship between Japan and this Italian exhibition space evolved since 1930?

### 3 Japan in Palazzo delle Esposizioni

Designed by Pio Piacentini, Palazzo delle Esposizioni was constructed as an exhibition hall in 1883. It is located on the Via Nazionale, near the Roma Termini railway station. It was conceived to address the need for the construction of particularly representative buildings and to provide the city with all the necessary structures for its new role as the capital. The aim was to create the first building in Italy dedicated to the Fine Arts, establishing a connection with the artistic history of the past and present.<sup>6</sup> It has housed important historical exhibitions such as the *Mostra della Rivoluzione Fascista* (Exhibition of the Fascist Revolution, 1932-34) and has provided the main venue

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<sup>6</sup> *Il progetto di Pio Piacentini nella Roma Capitale*, <https://www.palazzoesposizione.it/pagine/il-progetto-di-pio-piacentini-nel-programma-di-roma-capitale>.

for the Rome Quadriennale since 1931 (Ghirardo 1992, 68-70). Throughout the twentieth century, Japan has been thematised in three major exhibitions in the Palazzo delle Esposizioni, in 1930, 1958 and 1995, respectively. Despite the thematical heterogeneity, these three exhibitions reflect the socio-political entanglements of art between Italy and Japan during the interwar, post-war, and post-Cold War periods.

### 3.1 *Esposizione di Arte Giapponese, 1930*

As a consequence of political agreements with Japan, there was an increase in exhibitions featuring contemporary Japanese painters in the first half of the twentieth century. The initiation of a long series of contemporary art exhibitions in Rome occurred with the 1930 exhibition at Palazzo delle Esposizioni [fig. 1]. Organised and sponsored by Baron Ōkura Kishichirō (1882-1963), this exhibition reunited hanging scrolls and folding screens from a group of contemporary *nihonga* 日本画 (lit. Japanese-style painting) painters including the nationalistic painter Yokoyama Taikan. On 26 April, Benito Mussolini, Victor Emmanuel III of Italy and his wife Elena of Montenegro attended the exhibition's opening (Yokoyama 1930). Their presence marked a sign of friendship between the two countries in the 1930s (Caterina, Tamburello 1978, 7).<sup>7</sup> The painter Cipriano Efisio Oppo, the founder of the Rome Quadriennale, also visited the exhibition in the company of Japanese people. The art exhibition became a reasonable pretext to celebrate the close cultural and political relationship between Japan and Italy, preceding the official emergence of the Axis powers, as Yokoyama reported later in a journal article:

From a cultural-historical point of view, it is precious that two different nations, far removed from each other by a distance of ten thousand miles, could chorus harmoniously together in the most profound and highest realm of spiritual resonance [...]. It means that the citizens of Italy and Japan were united at the height of their ideological sentiment. (Yokoyama 1930)

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<sup>7</sup> The victory over Russia in the early 1900s led Japan to be regarded by European nations as a 'yellow peril'. Yet, Italian fascism reinterpreted Japan, which, in a sense, traced the ideological trajectory of the Imperial Ancient Rome: both were reference points for European (Rome) and Asian (Japan) civilisations (Miyake 2018, 618). Consequently, despite the fascist inclination towards Nazi 'racial' ideals, following military alliances between the two countries, Italian narratives regarding Japan sought to increasingly portray it as a counterpart to Italy in the Asian context. This led to comparisons, such as assimilating sumo wrestlers to their Roman counterparts and equating Manchuria with Abyssinia. As a result, Japan not only assumed the role of a military ally but also acquired the metaphorical status of a blood brother in these narratives (cf. Raiteri 2005; Miyake 2018).



**Figure 1**  
Catalogue of the Exhibition *Esposizione di Arte Giapponese* held in 1930 at Palazzo delle Esposizioni, Rome

As a counterpart to *yōga* 洋画 (lit. Western-style painting) using oil colours, *nihonga* was the painting style that dominated some overseas exhibitions of contemporary Japanese art organised around 1930 (e.g. Paris, Rome, Berlin, US). For the dominance of *nihonga* at the time, art historian Yōko Hayashi-Hibino put forward two factors that could have affected the official preference. The one factor was commercial: *nihonga* had a broader European market (Hayashi-Hibino 1998, 95). For the Rome exhibition, however, this could only be a secondary factor because Baron Ōkura Kishichirō purchased the totality of the exhibits after the show, and most of the artworks implied in this transaction integrated the collection of Okura Museum of Art after the war (Okura Museum of Art, <https://www.shukokan.org/out-line/>). The other factor Hayashi-Hibino pointed out was embedded in the rising nationalism: *nihonga* was intended to be the ‘national art’ (Hayashi-Hibino 1998, 95). This presumption resonates with Yokoyama’s statement that *nihonga* was endowed with “deep Oriental spirit and high ideals of subjectivity” (Yokoyama 1930).

Moreover, the historical photographs documenting the exhibition and its vernissage enable visualisation of the scenography back then.<sup>8</sup>

<sup>8</sup> It is possible to view some photos of the exhibition on the Istituto Luce website at the following link: <https://patrimonio.archivioluca.com/luce-web/detail/IL3000044147/12/sala-del-palazzo-esposizioni-dipinti-sulle-pareti-occasione-della-prima-mostra-d-arte-giapponese.html?indexPhoto=0>.

Additionally, a video of the exhibition setup can also be viewed at this link: <https://patrimonio.archivioluca.com/luce-web/detail/IL5000019636/2/allestimento-mostra-d-arte-giapponese-roma-7.html>.



The dome structure of Palazzo delle Esposizioni was decorated with gigantic Japanese and Italian flags, as the venue provided the space where people of two nations dialogued with each other. On a wall that stretches horizontally in one of the exhibition rooms, each hanging scroll appeared homogeneous in form and size, enclosed within an area of equal size divided by the trimming lines of the wall. Whilst the subject matter of each painting was distinctive, the homogeneity of the format resulted in a solemn and dignified presentation of the artwork. Although the audience could circulate freely within the horizontally extended rectangular space, this turned into an experience like a military parade.

While this exhibition is not the primary focus of the paper, as it was a contemporary art exhibition of the time, it will serve as a foundation for comprehending the political decisions in showcasing pieces of Japanese art in Italy based on the specific political context.

### 3.2 *Tesori dell'Arte Giapponese, 1958-59*

From 18 December 1958 to 1 February 1959, with the exhibition *Tesori dell'Arte Giapponese*, Palazzo delle Esposizioni was occupied by Japanese art for the second time. Displaying 143 objects considered essential works of art from Japanese history, the show of Japanese art was not only conceived to attract attention from Italian audience, but as part of the travelling exhibition that was also presented in Paris (Musée d'Art Moderne), London (Victoria and Albert Museum), and The Hague (Museum voor Moderne Kunst),<sup>9</sup> celebrating the event that Japan became a member state in the United Nations in December 1956. Hence, rather than seducing European visitors, the diplomatic message was the primary purpose for this temporary translocation of artworks in 1958, accompanied by high transport and insurance costs and the risk of damages for the fragile antiquities. To transcend the militaristic past and restore diplomatic relationships, the post-war Japanese government intended to restore international reputation with the country's long history and distinctive cultural treasure, in other words, through cultural diplomacy. Artworks and exhibitions, thus, became an instrument for softening friction between Japan and other countries.

The politician Kawai Yahachi (1877-1960), who wrote the preface for the exhibition catalogue [fig. 2], claimed the aesthetical supremacy

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<sup>9</sup> The Museum voor Moderne Kunst, or Haags Gemeentemuseum, was a museum in The Hague established in 1886. From 1998 to September 2019, it became the Gemeentemuseum Den Haag (Municipal Museum of The Hague). In October 2019, the museum is renamed as the Kunstmuseum Den Haag (Art Museum of The Hague).

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of Japanese art: “Beauty can unite all humanity” (Kawai 1958, 9). According to him, these exhibits have been “thoroughly discussed and selected”, and they were “examples of the highest quality currently available to send abroad” (9). His assertion was credible as the loans came from important official institutions, prestigious Buddhist temples and Shinto shrines, museums, and private collections.<sup>10</sup> Notably, the Japanese Emperor lent one work from the imperial collection. It was a pair of folding screens, *Warm Spring Day*, painted by Takeuchi Seiho in 1924 and depicting sleepily accumbent deer. Deer are divine messengers in Shinto (“Shinto Symbols” 1966, 14), and here, according to the catalogue, they symbolise the peaceful atmosphere of a warm spring day (*Tesori dell’Arte Giapponese* 1958, 55). Despite the traditional medium of folding screens, the exquisite treatment of the deer’s fur embodies the realist tendency of the painter Takeuchi, formed by the Shijō School but “influenced by Western painting” (55). Spring is a subject of a new beginning, giving hope. Deer, the sacred animals, are depicted as harmless and innocent. One can deduce the message that the emperor Hirohito wished to deliver to the European public during the post-war period. The imperial family showed considerable solicitude to the travelling exhibition, which was also confirmed by the presence of Prince Takamatsu at the vernissage.



**Figure 2**  
Catalogue of the exhibition  
*Tesori dell’Arte Giapponese*, held in 1958  
at Palazzo delle Esposizioni, Rome

**10** Many of the loans come from prestigious Buddhist temples and Shinto shrines in Japan, including the Kōryū-ji and Byōdō-in in Kyoto prefecture, Hōryū-ji, Kasuga Taisha, Tōdai-ji in Nara. Among the institutions that provided the works were, in particular, the National Commission for the Protection of Cultural Property and the Tokyo National Museum.

This exhibition also travelled to Paris in 1958. The exhibition's French title *L'art japonais à travers les siècles* clearly summed up the organiser's intention to demonstrate the continuity of Japanese art.<sup>11</sup> This show allowed the Italian public to become familiar with various Japanese painting styles and, as emphasised by Marcello Camillucci, contributed to dispelling the myth of Japanese art's "supine dependence" on Chinese art (Camillucci 1959, 100).

Comparing the objects on display with the Japanese art accessible in Italy previously mentioned, the inclusion of the archaeological objects section dating back to the prehistoric period was striking: Three Jōmon period *dogū* 土偶 figurines,<sup>12</sup> and five Kofun period *haniwa* 埴輪,<sup>13</sup> were on display. How were archaeological objects presented in an art exhibition? An analysis of the selection and description of these periodised objects will shed light on the place they occupied in the continuity of a discourse narrated in the exhibition.

### 3.2.1 Jōmon Period

From the Jōmon period,<sup>14</sup> described in the catalogue as a Neolithic period (in the catalogue dated from 2500 BC to 200 BC) organised into tribes, the displayed objects consist exclusively of *dogū* figurines. Additionally, they are categorised in the catalogue under the macro-category of "sculptures" (*Tesori dell'Arte Giapponese* 1958, 57). Moreover, the *dogū* are described in Italian as *statuette* (statuettes). Although mentioned, the characteristic vessels of the period have not been exposed, presumably due to transportation difficulties at that time.

The selection of exhibited objects includes:

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**11** The Paris version of the exhibition was organised by the Commission for the Protection of Cultural Property in Japan. The initiative to host the exhibition in France was taken by the Direction générale des Affaires Culturelles, the Direction des Musées de France and the Association Française d'Action Artistique (*L'art japonais à travers les siècles* 1958, 1).

Similarly, it can be argued that the Italian side has no direct influence over the content of the exhibition. As far as the exhibition in Rome is concerned, the contents of the catalogue do not suggest to which party the initiative is attributed. Nevertheless, it is clear that the institutions such as the Italian Ministry of Foreign Affairs and the Ministry of Public Works, the Italian Embassy in Tokyo, the IsMEO were involved in the organisation (*Tesori dell'Arte Giapponese* 1958, 1).

**12** Clay figurines typical of the Jōmon period. On the origins and significance of the *dogū* figures, see in this regard Kaner (2009).

**13** Terracotta clay figures typical of the Kofun period.

**14** The current dating for the period is c. 14500 or 11500-1000 BCE. To understand the new Jōmon periodisation, please refer to Mizoguchi (2013). However, the dates as recorded in the catalogues are provided in the text to highlight changes in considering the beginning and end of Periods based on archaeological developments.

- Three *dogū*: clay figurine (Jōmon period, probably second millennium BC, Kurokoma-mura, Yamanashi Prefecture); clay figurine (period not mentioned, from a shell mound at Shimpukuji, Iwatsuki-shi, Saitama Prefecture. Property of Mr. Takeo Nakazawa, Tokyo. Inscribed in the Register of Important Cultural Property); clay figurines (Late Jōmon period, first millennium BC, Kamegaoka, Kizukuri-machi, Aomori Prefecture. Property of Mr. Gengo Echigoya, Aomori. Inscribed in the Register of Important Art Objects).

### 3.2.2 Yayoi Period

In the catalogue of the 1958 exhibition, there were few details about this period (in the catalogue dated from 200 BC to 400 AD) as it was mistakenly considered of short duration at that time.<sup>15</sup> It is mainly emphasised that “[t]his culture, called Yayoi, brought elements of Chinese and Korean civilisation to Japan, such as new agricultural techniques, the wheel and the kiln for ceramic production, and sporadic use of bronze and iron” (*Tesori dell’Arte Giapponese* 1958, 12). Indeed, many of the most significant discoveries of the Yayoi period, such as the Yoshinogari site, came later. However, there are no displayed objects from the period.

### 3.2.3 Kofun Period

Designated in the catalogue as the “Great Burial Mound Period” (in the catalogue dated from 400 AD to 600 AD),<sup>16</sup> it is emphasised that, following the Korean tradition, the role of the large mounds was central as the burial sites for the most important persons (*Tesori dell’Arte Giapponese* 1958, 12). Additionally, the catalogue states that the *haniwa* were crafted using a “tecnica primitiva” (primitive technique) (*Tesori dell’Arte Giapponese* 1958, 12). The selection of exhibited objects includes:

- Five *haniwa*: warrior (Great Burial Mound Period, fifth-sixth century AD, Chūjō-mura, Saitama Prefecture); woman (Great Burial Mound Period, fifth-sixth century AD, Jūjō-mura, Saitama

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<sup>15</sup> The dating of the Yayoi period is still uncertain due to continuous new discoveries, but it is believed to be from 900 or 400 BCE to 250 CE. Still, two intermediate and transitional periods are mentioned. The first from 800 BCE to 300 BCE when the Jōmon period and the nascent Yayoi period coexisted. The second is from 250 CE to 300 CE, a transitional period between Late Yayoi and Early Kofun visible especially by the emergence of a different funerary architecture (cf. Mizoguchi 2013).

<sup>16</sup> The current dating for the period is c. 250-710 CE.



**Figure 3**  
Woman seated on a high stool, Kofun period,  
Ōkawa-mura, Gumma Prefecture.  
Tokyo National Museum,  
ColBase (<https://colbase.nich.go.jp/>)

Prefecture. Property of Mr. Hisashi Ōkura, Tokyo); woman seated on a high stool (Great Burial Mound Period, fifth-sixth century AD, Ōkawa-mura, Gumma Prefecture. Tokyo National Museum [fig. 3]); deer (Great Burial Mound Period, fifth-sixth century AD, Ibaragi Prefecture. Property of Mr. Keiji Takakuma, Tokyo); monkey (Great Burial Mound Period, fifth-sixth century AD, Tachibana-mura, Ibaragi Prefecture. Property of Mr. Takeo Nakazawa, Tokyo).

The anthropomorphic *haniwa* and the monkey shaped *haniwa* were at the time of the exhibition already inscribed in the Registry of Important Cultural Properties.

### 3.3 Il Giappone prima dell'Occidente, 1995-96

L'Ambasciatore Carlo Perrone Capano, gran diplomatico e gran signore (lasciatemelo dire con l'empatia che si prova di fronte a una specie in estinzione) cui devo il mio lungo soggiorno a Tokyo cominciato nel 1974 essendo egli allora il capo della nostra rappresentazione diplomatica, mi diceva anni dopo a Roma: bisogna fare una grande mostra in Italia, anzi qui a Roma, di arte antica giapponese. E io: Ambasciatore, è quanto mai difficile e poi non sono un nipponista, ma come prova di fedeltà feudale verso di lei,

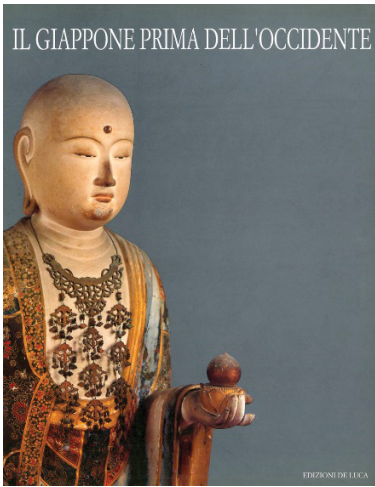
e con il suo aiuto, tenterò. Di fronte alla determinazione di Carlo Perrone Capano anche la Rocca di Gibilterra appare vacillante: soli, ostinati, tenaci abbiamo progettata e promossa la mostra fino alla sua realizzazione, coinvolgendovi il Ministero degli Affari Esteri per la parte diplomatica, il Comune di Roma per la parte organizzativa, l'Istituto per il Medio e l'Estremo Oriente per la parte scientifica e naturalmente le componenti nonché caute autorità giapponesi, dato che tutti i pezzi esposti provengono dal Giappone. E l'abbiamo anche battezzata col titolo *Il Giappone prima dell'Occidente*. (de Marchis 1995, 11)

Ambassador Carlo Perrone Capano, a distinguished diplomat and a true gentleman (allow me to say it with the empathy one feels in the presence of a species facing extinction), to whom I owe my extended stay in Tokyo starting in 1974 when he was the head of our diplomatic representation, said to me years later in Rome: "We should organise a major exhibition in Italy, even here in Rome, showcasing ancient Japanese art." I replied: "Ambassador, it is quite challenging, and besides, I am not a Japan enthusiast. However, as a sign of feudal loyalty to you, and with your help, I will attempt it." In the face of Carlo Perrone Capano's determination, even the Rock of Gibraltar appears to waver: alone, persistent, and tenacious, we planned and promoted the exhibition until its realisation, involving the Ministry of Foreign Affairs for the diplomatic aspect, the Municipality of Rome for the organisational part, the Institute for the Middle and Far East for the scientific aspect, and naturally, the cautious Japanese authorities, as all the exhibited pieces come from Japan. And we also baptised it with the title *Japan Before the West*.<sup>17</sup>

With this charming introduction, art critic Giorgio de Marchis expresses a strong desire to have another significant exhibition of Japanese art in Italy. Indeed, the exhibition *Il Giappone prima dell'Occidente* (15 November 1995-15 January 1996 [fig. 4]) marks the return of valuable artistic works from the Japanese archipelago to Italy. As emphasised by the then Minister of Foreign Affairs, Susanna Agnelli, and the then Ambassador Bartolomeo Attolico (President of the Italo-Japanese Cultural Centre of the Institute for the Middle and Far East), it had been since 1958 that Italy had not hosted such an exhibition on ancient Japanese art (Agnelli 1995, 2; Attolico 1995, 10).

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<sup>17</sup> Unless otherwise stated, all translations are by the Authors.



**Figure 4**  
Catalogue of the exhibition  
*Il Giappone prima dell'Occidente*,  
held in 1995 at Palazzo delle Esposizioni, Rome

The exhibition was part of the cultural program *Japan in Italy '95-'96*, an event organised by committees from both countries and with the collaboration of both governments to introduce Japan to various Italian cities through cultural activities (Giappone in Italia 95/96, <https://www.italiagiappone.it/1995.html>). The exhibition showcased artefacts from different historical periods: from the Jōmon period to the Heian period, up to shortly before the Edo period. As explained by de Marchis, who was part of the Scientific Committee, the idea of organising an exhibition focused on a single period was excluded because, especially for ancient art, it would have been challenging for some works to leave Japan (de Marchis 1995, 11). Instead, exhibiting objects from different epochs and types would allow Italian visitors to understand better ancient Japanese art (11). The exhibition was divided into sections covering the periodisation of Japanese history. De Marchis describes the choice of objects for each periodisation as a “sampling” representing the historical period of the section (12). In doing so, the visitor could follow a logical and temporal thread, understanding the value of the artwork in its context of origin (12). The selection of works to be displayed was made through an exchange of requests from the Italian side and on the proposal of scholars from the *Bunkachō* 文化庁 (The Agency for Cultural Affairs) who were part of the Japanese scientific committee, also based on the availability of loans from museums and other institutions (temples,

etc.). The catalogue entries were curated by *Bunkachō* scholars and translated into Italian.<sup>18</sup>

*Il Giappone prima dell'Occidente* thus marks an important milestone in the history of Japanese temporary exhibitions in Italy, as it is the first organised to immerse the Italian visitor in a chronological, historical, and cultural journey for a better understanding of the development of Japanese art. Of considerable significance is the attention given to archaeological artefacts, constituting the first example of Japanese artistic expression. The section titled “Cult and Ritual in Prehistory” was curated by Professor Adolfo Tamburello (1934-), who was a professor of the History and Civilisation of the Far East at the Istituto Universitario Orientale in Naples.<sup>19</sup>

### 3.3.1 Jōmon Period

A noticeable disparity in the presentation of the Jōmon period, as opposed to the catalogue *Tesori dell'Arte Giapponese* (1958), is apparent in the definition of the period itself. In the initial exhibition, the Jōmon period was categorised as ‘Neolithic’, establishing a comparison with our concept of what we imagine as Neolithic. This approach was motivated by the fact that early Western archaeologists in Japan, at the beginning of the twentieth century, categorised Jōmon as Neolithic (cf. Munro 1908), in addition to the perception that the ancient Japanese period was once considered of little academic relevance and somewhat arcane by the ‘West’ (Hudson 1997, 81). However, already by the 1970s, it began to be deemed inappropriate to identify Jōmon as an entirely Neolithic period (cf. Bleed 1976), and recent research has focused on the inaccuracy of such a designation, considering the development of the Jōmon period as radically different from the European Neolithic (cf. Kaner, Ishikawa 2007). In the 1995 exhibition,

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<sup>18</sup> Information obtained through private correspondence on 18 December 2023 with Prof. Paolo Calvetti (Ca’ Foscari University of Venice), who was then a member of the Advisory Board.

<sup>19</sup> Adolfo Tamburello was a professor of the History and Civilisation of the Far East at the University of Rome. From 1968, he held the position of lecturer in the History of Art of the Far East at the Istituto Universitario Orientale in Naples and in the History and Civilisation of India and the Far East at the University of Turin. He served as a professor of the History and Civilisation of the Far East at the Istituto Universitario Orientale from 1972 to 2008. Among his contributions to the dissemination and study of Asian culture in Italy, Tamburello was the founder of the Italian Association for Japanese Studies (AISTUGIA), along with Fosco Maraini and Giuliana Stramigioli. He participated as a member of the scientific committee in important exhibitions and was part of various academic institutions, including the Accademia Pontaniana and the Società Nazionale di Scienze, Lettere e Arti in Naples. Additionally, he was a member of the Matteo Ripa Study Centre and the Chinese College of the University of Naples ‘L'Orientale’ (Accademia Pontaniana s.d.).



on the contrary, Tamburello avoids mentioning the term ‘Neolithic’ within his explanation in the catalogue. He simply refers to the period by its name only (Tamburello 1995, 18-19, 58-60) and thus narates its geographical uniqueness.

The exhibited artefacts include:

- Five pieces of pottery: flame-shaped vessel (Middle Jōmon period, mid-third to first millennium BC, Umataka, Nagaoka, Niigata Prefecture, City Museum of Science of Nagaoka); pouring vessel (Late Jōmon period, mid-second to first millennium BC, Yagi B, Minamikayabechō, Hokkaidō, Department of Education of Minamikayabechō); container with hole (Late Jōmon period, mid-second to first millennium BC, Yagi B, Minamikayabechō, Hokkaidō, Department of Education of Minamikayabechō); terracotta vase (Middle Jōmon period, mid-third to second millennium BC, Tonobayashi, Enzan, Yamanashi Prefecture, Prefectural Archaeological Museum of Yamanashi. Important Cultural Property); vase with anthropomorphic mask (Middle Jōmon period, mid-third to second millennium BC, Tsukimimatsu, Ina, Nagano Prefecture, Department of Education of Ina).
- Four *dogū*: anthropomorphic figurine (Late Jōmon period, tenth-third century BC, Chobonaino, Minamikayabechō, Hokkaidō, Department of Education of Minamikayabechō. Important Cultural Property);<sup>20</sup> anthropomorphic figurine (Middle Jōmon period, mid-third to second millennium BC, Imojiya, Kushigatamachi, Yamanashi Prefecture, Department of Education of Kushigatamachi. Important Cultural Property); anthropomorphic figurine with hand on chest (Middle Jōmon period, mid-third to second millennium BC, Kamikurokoma, Misakamachi, Yamanashi Prefecture, Tokyo National Museum. Important Cultural Property

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**20** “Since its discovery, the artefact has been esteemed as a National Treasure. However, during that period, Minamikayabe Town lacked the necessary facilities to exhibit it such an Important Cultural Property. It is kept in the vault of the receiver general’s town government office after it has been put in a paulownia box inside a safety box, except when it was displayed at overseas exhibitions organized by Japan’s Agency for Cultural Affairs. It has not been removed for more than 30 years, which has led to some joking that it has been sentenced to 30 years imprisonment (The Japanese words for ‘safety box’ and ‘sentenced to imprisonment’ are both pronounced ‘kinko’). [...] It was in March 2007, approximately 32 years after the discovery, that the nickname ‘Kakku’ became widely known. The figurine was designated as a National Treasure and an interview with Ae Koita was published in a newspaper. In the interview she said, ‘Kakku, I am so glad that you got promotion’ and a picture of her big smile was in the newspaper. She used the word ‘promotion’ to express the upgrade from an Important Cultural Property to a National Treasure. Through the newspaper article I could see how important it is for her and that she treated Kakku like her own daughter. [...] Soon after the G8 Summit, it was exhibited at the British Museum as part of *The Power of Dogū* held in December 2009. [...] During the exhibition, Kakku acted as a kind of Goodwill Ambassador to impart the importance of the Jōmon culture” (Abe s.d.).

[fig. 5a]); anthropomorphic figurine (Late Jōmon period, X-III century BC, Kaburuki, Tajiri, Miyagi Prefecture, Tokyo National Museum. Important Cultural Property [fig. 5b]).

- One animal-shaped figurine (Late Jōmon period, tenth-third century BC, Bibi 4, Chitose, Hokkaidō, Department of Education of Chitose. Important Cultural Property).

### 3.3.2 Yayoi Period

The Yayoi period is a pivotal and delicate phase in establishing Japanese identity.<sup>21</sup> In the 1995 catalogue, Tamburello provided a comprehensive exploration of introducing bronze and iron to the archipelago, particularly emphasising weapons and ritual bells known as *dōtaku* 銅鐸 (Tamburello 1995, 19-20). Despite Tamburello's explanation regarding the significance of the introduction of rice cultivation and metal weapons, such objects have not been exhibited. This exposition puts forward a narrative depicting the Yayoi period as a multifaceted era characterised by diverse cultural aspects but still focused on the ritual aspect of the pre-protohistoric Japan. It is interesting the assertion made by the former Director of the Agency for Cultural Affairs of Japan, Tōyama Atsuko, who believes that despite the Chinese influence, which introduced the use of metal and rice cultivation, a unique culture began to emerge that diverged from the continental one. She suggests that the cultural and religious structure taking shape during this period is directly linked to that of contemporary Japanese society (Tōyama 1995, 5).

The exhibited artefacts include:

- One red-painted pedestal (Yayoi period, first century BC-first century AD, Nanaita, Yasuchō, Fukuoka Prefecture, Department of Education of Yasuchō).
- One red-painted jar (Yayoi period, first century BC-first century AD, Nanaita, Yasuchō, Fukuoka Prefecture, Department of Education of Yasuchō).
- Two: bronze bell-shaped with crossed bands (Yayoi period, first century BC-first century AD, Sakuragaoka, Hyōgo Prefecture,

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**21** It is normally referred to as a 'Yayoi package' for the Initial Yayoi culture, that is "a set of discourses/communication system, or a set of ways of thinking, doing things and communicating with one another that involved the use of certain material media" (Mizoguchi 2013, 63-4; Barnes 2015, 271). The Yayoi period was a period of enormous social as well as technological changes for the entire Japanese archipelago: new technologies of agriculture, new aspects of culture and thought, easily entered the archipelago through the Korean Peninsula. During this period real migratory flows began from the Peninsula to the shores of northern Kyūshū: people crossing the sea to land in the archipelago were called *Toraijin* 渡來人. For more on this topic see Rhee, Aikens, Barnes 2021.

Kobe City Museum. National Treasure); bronze bell-shaped decorated with a 'chain' motif (Yayoi period, first century BC – first century AD, Kibi, Mabichō, Okayama Prefecture, Tokyo National Museum [fig. 5c]).

### 3.3.3 Kofun Period

Considered today as the State Formation Period,<sup>22</sup> the Kofun period represents a complex era characterised by the formation of an emerging and consolidated social hierarchy towards its end and the emergence of tumulus graves that materially demonstrated these social changes. It is interesting to note the definition of the entire period given in the catalogue of the 1958 exhibition, where it is simply termed the "Period of Great Burials". In 1995, Tamburello did speak of "funerary megalithic" (20) while correctly using the name of the period.

The exhibited artefacts include:

- One bronze mirror with 'curved jewel' (*magatama*) motifs (Kofun period, fourth century AD, Shikinzan, Ōsaka, Kyoto University).
- Gilded bronze stirrups (Kofun period, seventh century AD, Miyajidake, Miyajidake Jinja, Fukuoka. National Treasure).
- Gilded bronze saddle fittings (Kofun period, sixth century AD, Fujinoki, Ikaruga, Nara Prefecture, Bunkachō. Important Cultural Property).
- Four *haniwa*: boat (Kofun period, fourth century AD, Nagahara Takamawari, Ōsaka, Bunkachō. Important Cultural Property); wild boar (Kofun period, sixth century AD, Tenjin'yama, Sakaimachi, Gunma Prefecture, Tokyo National Museum. Important Cultural Property [fig. 5d]); woman with cup (Kofun period, sixth century AD, Tsukamawari, Gunma Prefecture, Bunkachō. Important Cultural Property); warrior (Kofun period, sixth century AD, Narizuka, Ōta, Gunma Prefecture, Archaeology Museum of Aikawa. Important Cultural Property [fig. 5e]).
- Two vessels: a stemmed vessel with a lid topped by a bird, Sue pottery (Kofun period, seventh century AD, Sumiyakidaira, Ichinomiya, Aichi Prefecture, Department of Education of Ichinomiya); a long-necked vessel, Sue pottery (Ganiana, Toba, Mie Prefecture, Tokyo National Museum [fig. 5f]).

<sup>22</sup> Cf. Tsude 1987; 1991; Farris 1998; Fukunaga 2004; 2018; Barnes 2007; Sasaki 2018.



**Figure 5** Some of the objects displayed at *Il Giappone prima dell'Occidente* exhibition: (A) anthropomorphic figurine with hand on chest (Middle Jōmon period, mid-third to second millennium BCE, Kamikurokoma, Misakamachi, Yamanashi Prefecture, Tokyo National Museum); (B) anthropomorphic figurine (Late Jōmon period, tenth-third century BCE, Kaburuki, Tajiri, Miyagi Prefecture, Tokyo National Museum); (C) bronze bell-shaped decorated with a 'chain' motif (Yayoi period, first century BCE-first century CE, Kibi, Mabichō, Okayama Prefecture, Tokyo National Museum); (D) wild boar (Kofun period, sixth century CE, Tenjin'yama, Sakaimachi, Gunma Prefecture, Tokyo National Museum); (E) warrior (Kofun period, sixth century CE, Narizuka, Ōta, Gunma Prefecture, Archaeology Museum of Aikawa); (F) a long-necked vessel, Sue pottery (Ganiana, Toba, Mie Prefecture, Tokyo National Museum). ColBase (<https://colbase.nich.go.jp/>)

#### 4 Narrating the Japanese Identity in Archaeological and Ancient Art Exhibits in Italy

As highlighted by the list of exhibited objects, the choice to present a specific narrative of ancient Japanese art and archaeology to Italian visitors becomes evident. The selection is often linked to the kind of Japanese identity that the exhibition aims to convey and the social changes that have influenced archaeology since the post-war period. Archaeology and the narration of a community's past play a crucial role in consolidating the bond between the individual and their national identity. This occurs because archaeological artefacts serve as symbolic communication means related to transcendent concepts and

entities, such as the original identity of the nation-state (Mizoguchi 2006a, 55). Japan, in particular, provides an interesting case study on the relationship between archaeology and national identity, as a significant portion of protohistoric archaeology is inherently linked to the imperial family, the emperor figure, and the construction of the nation-state's identity (cf. Smith 2001, 51-7). Archaeology plays a vital role for the Japanese in their perception of identity and history (cf. Fawcett 1996; Hudson 1997, 85). In the creation of the modern nation-state, the emperor was made the embodiment of Japanese identity, and a narrative was constructed with metaphorical ties – often supported by the creation of an ad hoc mythology – between the emperor and the people, where one could not survive without the other (Mizoguchi 2006a, 81). As Mizoguchi emphasises, archaeology was mobilised and exploited as a tool to legitimise and support this imperial narrative (81). During World War II, Japanese nationalism focused on the ideology of *tennōsei* 天皇制, the cult of the emperor. The pre-war emperor worship policy complicated archaeological interpretation in terms of peoples, especially the ancestral Japanese people, as archaeologists had to avoid interpretations that questioned the divine origins of the imperial line based on ancient texts like the *Kojiki* 古事記 (Records of Ancient Matters) and the *Nihon Shoki* 日本書紀 (The Chronicles of Japan) (Edwards 1991, 13; Habu, Fawcett 1999, 189).<sup>23</sup> To avoid ideological problems, archaeologists focused on detailed and apolitical typological studies of artefacts (cf. Bleed 1976; Fawcett 1996). The academic study of the state formation during the Kofun period was likely to face suppression, leading to a stagnation in research (Nakakubo 2018, 35). With Japan's defeat and the loss of the divine status of the emperor, Japanese archaeology began to focus on a narrative created and directed at ordinary Japanese people (Habu, Fawcett 1999, 189). This narrative highlighted the continuity that the Japanese people had with their ancestors, even from the Jōmon period (Hudson 1997, 86). It was emphasised how the prehistoric

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**23** Failla asserts that already during the Edo period, ancient objects were regarded from a mythological perspective aimed at associating them (and Japanese history) with mythological texts. Indeed, during the Edo period, scholars in Japan developed ideas and theories concerning the antiquity and ancient cultural and religious identity of the nation. Neo-Confucian scholars employed by various fiefdom administrations chronicled fortuitous discoveries from chance excavations in local chronicles. Their goal was to categorise the growing collections of ancient stone artefacts, resulting in detailed lists and descriptive records. Interpretations of historical contexts and finds varied between rationalist perspectives favoured by neo-Confucians and traditional, semi-mythological views, influenced by ancient Japanese chronicles like the *Nihon Shoki*. These scholarly endeavours elevated significant works to the status of 'treasures' (*hōmotsu* 宝物), becoming emblematic cultural symbols associated with territory, land, and the histories of fiefdoms. Mythological narratives of the past intertwined with elements of ethnic identity, alongside political and ideological aspirations, shaping the conceptualisation of Japan's 'national treasure' (*kokuhō* 国宝) (Failla 2004, 75).

cultures of the archipelago were more similar than different but at the same time substantially different from the rest of the world, thus contributing to a more pronounced sense of ‘unique culture’ and homogeneity in the context of Japanese historical-cultural development (Fawcett 1996, 76). According to *Nihonjinron* 日本人論 theories,<sup>24</sup> the Japanese are considered a ‘racially’ homogeneous entity both culturally and socially since prehistoric times, and they are believed to be different from any other population (cf. Dale 1986). Thus, archaeology has become a key element in understanding one’s past (Pearson 1992, 122) and rediscovering a national identity materialised in archaeological artefacts. Since the post-war period, archaeology has initiated programs to involve the local and national populations in rediscovering their identity through an understanding of the past (cf. Fawcett 1996). In the 1980s and 1990s, there was a genuine boom of interest in Japanese archaeology, as evidenced by front-page headlines about discoveries, the considerable number of books and volumes dedicated to the subject in the 1990s, and television programs broadcast on national networks.<sup>25</sup> Therefore, archaeology and identity in Japan are closely connected: the past consolidates the historical and cultural roots of the population.

#### 4.1 Tracing Identity Through Archaeological Exhibits: Narratives Embedded in Object Selections

The concept of identity in archaeology, as articulated in the introduction, is closely tied to the material choices made by the group. Through these choices, individuals identify themselves as affiliated with a specific identity. Therefore, the decision to exhibit particular objects while excluding others is integral to the identification process with the characteristics of a particular identity group. For instance, in both exhibitions, Jōmon and Kofun periods’ specific objects, *dōgu*

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**24** In the *Nihonjinron* movement, born in the post-war period and still prevalent today, there is a tendency to emphasise the uniqueness and distinctiveness of Japanese culture compared to European and American cultures (cf. Minami 1980; Goodman, Refsing 1992; Sugimoto 1999; Andō 2009).

**25** Pearson 1992, 116; Fawcett 1996, 60-2; Hudson 1997, 81-2; Nakakubo 2018, 39. According to Nakakubo (2018, 39): “In 1976, when data collection began, there were 1,571 cases of development-led rescue excavations and 155 cases of academic excavations. From the 1970s to the 1990s, while the number of academic excavations increased almost twofold, rescue excavations showed an overwhelming increase, with 8,536 cases in 1990. As the majority of the development projects were public works projects, there was no significant downturn following the collapse of the economic bubble, with a peak in 1996 at 11,738 cases. While a sudden decrease can be witnessed after 1996, the number of annual rescue excavations hovers at approximately 8,000 cases. Although not all of these excavations are of mounded tombs, the fact that a great number of excavations are conducted annually within Japan is readily apparent”.

and *haniwa*, were chosen for display. This suggests that, despite the evolving perception of archaeology from the early post-war years to the late nineties, Japanese identity was strongly objectified and self-identified in these two categories of artefacts. With new discoveries, the surge in archaeology's popularity, and the local populace's growing connection to their past, the narrative of Japanese identity has become more intricate, encompassing new objectification. An example is the difference in the narrative of the Yayoi period: with no objects on display in 1958, by 1995, there is a nuanced narrative portraying it as a foundational period for what is considered the essence of Japanese-ness, including elements such as rice cultivation and methodical, organised labour. However, although the characteristic aspect of agriculture is mentioned in the description, there are no exhibited items related to this. The choice was made to exhibit only objects from the ritual sphere.

Yet, it is also evident that there is an intent to showcase a facet of Japan that is markedly distinct from anything resembling European pre-protohistory artefacts and ancient art, creating a narrative of uniqueness and immutability.

Una visione armonica e grandiosa che si perde nella lontananza dei secoli e che giunge fino a varcare le soglie di questa nostra età testimoniando malgrado il mutare dei tempi, degli eventi e degli influssi una costante fedeltà ad alcuni fondamentali atteggiamenti dello spirito nipponico. (Lavagnino 1958, 7)

A harmonious and grandiose vision that is lost in the distance of centuries and reaches as far as the threshold of our age, testifying, despite changing times, events, and influences, a constant loyalty to certain fundamental attitudes of the Japanese spirit.

Lavagnino, moreover, states that the exhibition will be an opportunity to

evaluate the relationships of progression also in comparison to what was happening in the West at the same time, defining, in the similarity of certain solutions, elective affinities that cannot fail to find echoes and consensus in our souls. (7)

Although the sentence was not said with a negative intention, it again recalls that 'we'-'other' relationship in which a comparison of artistic development is sought that inevitably leads to a judgment of comparison with Italy.

On the other hand, a primary point of discussion regarding the 1995 exhibition is the choice to display exclusively the sphere of cult and ritual to the Italian audience. This aligns with the vision

and narrative of the origins of the Japanese people closely linked to the mysterious and mystical sphere of autochthonous cults and the imperial cult narrated in the *Kojiki* and *Nihon Shoki*. A narrative where, through the selection of exhibited objects, a repertoire emerges, evoking ancestral rituals and stylistic characteristics unique to the archipelago. It could be assumed that this choice falls within the concepts of *Nihonjinron* and the self-orientalistic vision (cf. Miyake 2014) that Japan has enacted upon itself.<sup>26</sup> The Italian visitor, observing the exhibition, will notice artefacts that are unique examples of Asian artistic expression, described in the catalogue as such.

#### 4.1.1 Jōmon Period

This period plays a crucial role in Japanese history and contemporary identity, as it is considered one of the critical elements in the uninterrupted chain of Japan's past (Hudson 1997, 81), where the roots of the Japanese people's history and Japaneseness reside (Mizoguchi 2006b, 58). In the broader context of the Jōmon narrative, a significant aspect related to the decision to exhibit *dogū* figurines is the association of Jōmon with the feminine, shamanism, and a nostalgic sentiment that may contain remedies for contemporary challenges (57-64). The *dogū* displayed in the 1995 exhibition fully depicts the feminine figure with breasts and a swollen abdomen. In the same descriptions written by the Japanese, they are referred to as "goddesses of fertility" (*Il Giappone prima dell'Occidente* 1995, 64). From the pottery choices in the 1995 exhibition emerges a uniquely impactful and visually striking art. Rather than showcasing the development of pottery during the period with its various regional differences, the most distinctive examples have been chosen. The catalogue underscores how vessels with 'flame' decorations are the most representative of the period,<sup>27</sup> and entirely absent from the Euro-Asian region (61). The decision to place ancient art in the section "Cult and ritual

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**26** Miyake (2014, 36) states that during the latter half of the nineteenth century, Japan faced an urgent situation posed by the euro-American great powers imposing limited sovereignty on the country through the 'Unequal Treaties', foreseeing its colonisation as already occurring towards its Asian neighbours. The formation of Japan's national identity necessarily contends with Eurocentric occidentalism, now hegemonic worldwide. This national identity is shaped through a process of self-Orientalism, presupposing a much more radical and active operation: the internalisation of Euro-American occidentalism. This involves adopting its essentialising and contrasting grammar, its generative structure of collective identity and alterity, its paradigmatic assumptions: West = modernity = universalism vs East = tradition = particularism.

**27** Despite the choice to exhibit this specific type of vessel, it should be noted that flame-rimmed pots are only distributed in a very restricted area centring on Niigata Prefecture.



in prehistory” inevitably led to the exclusion of everyday life objects. The absence of these items, however, further reinforces the image of the ‘exotic’ often associated with Japan, distancing the visitor from finding common elements with their own past.

#### 4.1.2 Yayoi Period

It is interesting to note that the Yayoi period was practically forgotten in the 1958 exhibition. In both displays, Yayoi is considered the period when metals entered the archipelago, along with influences from China and Korea. Mizoguchi (2006b, 65) believes that 1) the introduction of metals (and thus weapons) and 2) the assimilation of foreign concepts later internalised by the Japanese align with the self-image cultivated by the Japanese from the conclusion of World War II to the economic zenith of the 1980s. In Mizoguchi’s view, if Jōmon embodies the feminine and shamanism, Yayoi symbolises masculine activities (such as bronze and iron weapons, ritual objects shaped like weapons, and agricultural tools), and labour (66).

#### 4.1.3 Kofun Period

The Kofun period, as stated by Mizoguchi (2006a), is the period when the sense of origin and continuity must be perceived through Japanese archaeology (104). Indeed, the Kofun period and the keyhole-shaped tombs typical of the period are considered the beginning of the continuity of the unilinear descent line of both the dominant clan (Yamato clan, from which the imperial line still derives today) and the system of regional leaders (104). Therefore, if they symbolise continuity, their beginning is to be placed before this period (104).

Significant is the description of *haniwa*: in the *Tesori dell’Arte Giapponese* exhibition, its crafting technique was described as “tecnica primitiva”, an adjective avoided by Tamburello (1958, 12). Indeed, words have power within them and, depending on how they are used, can alter the description of reality that is presented (Sornig 1989, 95). In this case, ‘primitive’ takes on a not entirely positive meaning as it recalls a technique considered so simple that it is compared to our prehistoric ‘Western’ techniques.<sup>28</sup> A power relationship is therefore

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**28** According to the Italian Enciclopedia Treccani, the word ‘primitive’ also the meaning of: “Il termine, per influsso delle schematizzazioni evoluzionistiche del 19° secolo, viene spesso riferito (con una connotazione più o meno coscientemente limitativa che da un punto di vista etnologico risulta oggi priva di effettivo valore) a manifestazioni, costumi e modi di vita di popoli o gruppi etnici extraeuropei tuttora esistenti che non si sono adeguati alle forme di civiltà e di vita delle nazioni moderne occidentali o

created through language, highlighting issues of power asymmetries, manipulation, exploitation and structural inequalities between ‘our European past’ and ‘their Japanese past’. Ancient Japanese is therefore considered in opposition to ours, where a conflict is created between a more advanced ‘us’ and a more retrograde ‘other’. This is even more important when one considers that it was done to describe one of the most important artistic aspects of the Kofun period, considered the period of the Imperial Tombs and thus indirectly linked to the whole discourse of Japanese identity.

## 4.2 From 1958 to 1995: A Narrative Shift for Archaeology and Art History

Art, which legitimised the over-one-year dislocation of these objects from Japan to Europe, embraced in its subcategory ‘sculpture’ of the 1958 exhibition three *dōgu* from Jōmon and five *haniwa* from Kofun. The exhibition catalogue classified the 143 exhibits into seven categories: Buddhist paintings, *yamato-e* 大和絵, *sumi-e*, portraits, different schools of the seventeenth, eighteenth, and nineteenth centuries, the beginning of the twentieth century, and sculptures. Painting and sculpture excluded here the *ukiyo-e*, while the Nō masks and prehistorical artefacts, perplexingly, entered the section ‘sculptures’. While

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orientali: le tribù p. dell’Oceania; i costumi p. di alcune popolazioni africane. Analoga connotazione ha il termine come sost., soprattutto al plur., primitivi, introdotto in antropologia culturale e in etnologia dagli evoluzionisti del 19° secolo come alternativo di selvaggi, barbari, popoli di natura, per indicare una serie di popoli dalle forme semplici e promiscue di vita, presso le quali ritenevano di avere scoperto la documentazione storica e la sopravvivenza dei ‘primi stadi’ (da cui appunto primitivi) dello sviluppo culturale; tali popoli furono ritenuti privi di religione e incapaci di conoscenza razionale (dove le varie teorie sulla cultura dei p., dall’ateismo p. alle teorie della promiscuità sessuale, del preanimismo, del prelogismo, ecc., rivelatesi poi del tutto inconsistenti con lo studio diretto di tali popolazioni)” (Enciclopedia Treccani, <https://www.treccani.it/vocabolario/primitivo1/>).

The term, influenced by the evolutionary schematisations of the nineteenth century, is often referred to (with a more or less consciously limiting connotation that ethnologically is now devoid of actual value) to manifestations, customs, and ways of life of still-existing non-European ethnic groups or peoples who have not conformed to the forms of civilisation and life of modern Western or Eastern nations: the primitive tribes of Oceania; the primitive customs of some African populations. A similar connotation is associated with the term as a noun, especially in the plural, ‘primitives’, introduced in cultural anthropology and ethnology by nineteenth-century evolutionists as an alternative to terms like savages, barbarians, people of nature, to indicate a series of peoples with simple and promiscuous forms of life, where they believed to have discovered historical documentation and the survival of the ‘first stages’ (hence, primitives) of cultural development; such peoples were considered devoid of religion and incapable of rational knowledge (hence the various theories about primitive culture, from primitive atheism to theories of sexual promiscuity, preanimism, pre-logic, etc., later revealed to be entirely inconsistent with direct studies of these populations).

the intentional inclusion of archaeological artefacts into a show of Japanese art blurred the boundaries between artworks and prehistorical artefacts, Jōmon and Kofun were periodised, hence included as part of Japanese history. As for the Yayoi culture that came between Jōmon and Kofun, it was also periodised in the chronology of the catalogue, whereas surprisingly, no artefacts from the Yayoi culture came across the exhibit selection. The total absence of Yayoi was probably caused by the judgment that Yayoi was only a “*cultura di transizione*” (transitional culture), marked by its agricultural development and exchange with the continent (*Tesori dell'Arte Giapponese* 1958, 12).

Moreover, the few exhibits representing the Jōmon and Kofun periods were all bounded to humanoid figurines, which were prioritised in the selection over other representative artefacts such as the cord-pattern ceramics (the exquisite three-dimensional creations that inspired Morse for the designation of Jōmon). The emphasis on the figurative depiction of human(-like) being articulated the declaration of Japanese identity on the one side because these corporal features belong to the simulacra created by the historical population of Japan. Figuration and narration prevailed as two common characteristics across media and genres: Buddhist statuary and paintings, *kakemono*, etc. On the other hand, the exhibited landscape and animal paintings, two less narrative genres, enhanced the figurative image through a euphemistic translation of Japaneseness. Classical *topoi* such as pine trees, peonies, cherry blossoms, and mountains resonate with the vital spirituality expressed by the anthropomorphic figures of *Chōjū-jinbutsu-giga* 鳥獸人物戯画. The unspoken principle of distinguishing characteristic features of Japanese from Chinese and Korean was applied to most of the works selected for the 1958 exhibition.

Although the 1995 exhibition inherited mainly the genealogical concept of Japanese art established in the 1958 show, the imagery of Japan was reshaped through a different selection of objects. A closer observation of the exhibits' selection reveals that the archaeology of Japan has been given more quantitative and qualitative attention than in the 1958 exhibition. The progressive attitude can be attested from two perspectives. On the one side, the archaeological section embraced objects of various natures. Rather than focusing on the sculptures depicting human-like figures, the 1995 exhibition also included Jōmon and Yayoi potteries, *dōtaku*, as well as bronze mirrors and gilded bronze saddles and stirrups from the Kofun period. Beyond the humanoid representation, the *haniwa* section comprised a wild boar and a canoe. Among a total of 21 exhibits from Jōmon to Kofun, only one featured in both 1958 and 1995 exhibitions: the anthropomorphic figure with a hand on the chest from the site Kamikurokoma dated Middle Jōmon period, endowed with the original physical appearance of “*una specie di Venere di Milo di epoca Jōmon*” (a kind

of Venus de Milo from the Jōmon era) (*Il Giappone prima dell'Occidente* 1995, 65). On the other hand, the 1995 exhibition abandoned the categorisation method of fine arts adopted in 1958, which prioritised paintings and created a mishmash of non-painting objects in the 'sculpture' section. As concretised in the exhibition catalogue, the narrative of Japanese art history began with the flame-shaped pot of the Middle Jōmon period – the archetype of potteries with cord patterns – claiming for the chronology of Japanese art history that could be traced back to Jōmon.

Some crucial factors underlay the prioritisation of chronology over fine-arts-based classification in the time frame. As a resistance to globalisation since the 1980s, the nation-state of Japan requires a historical narrative with characteristic features distinguishing it from its neighbours. Consequently, the prehistory was appealed to enhance the homogeneous narrative. The pursuit for the latter coincided with the ground-breaking discovery of the Sannai-Maruyama Site in 1992, the catalyst challenging the outdated understanding that Jōmon people were only primitive hunter-gatherers. Therefore, the 1995 exhibition even provided Japan with an empirical ground to showcase pre-historical artefacts abroad before the exhibition *Jōmon, l'art du Japon des origines* (1998, Paris) opened the new era which Kobayashi Tatsuo described as "Jōmon diplomacy" (Nakamura 2002, 22-4).

The fact that the 1958 and 1995 exhibitions both presented archaeology as part of Japanese art in Italy raised the question of 'amalgamation' between art and archaeology in Japan's overseas exhibitions. This question can be answered from an institutional perspective. Although the 'Western' notion of 'art' has long been assimilated into Japan, the 'National Treasure' system (*kokuhō*) and the 'Important Cultural Properties' system (*jūyō bunkazai* 重要文化財) act as legal means to classify cultural artefacts as materially superior or inferior.<sup>29</sup> The 'Important Cultural Properties' system, for example, uses a designation system and a registration system to provide legal protection and restrictions on the alteration, repair, and export of selected cultural properties (Outline of the National Institute for Cultural Heritage 2007). On the other hand, National Treasures are divided into two categories, namely buildings and structures and fine arts

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**29** 'National Treasure' is a designation that has been employed by the Meiji government in the Ancient Shrines and Temples Preservation Law of 1897, later replaced by the National Treasures Preservation Law of 1929. The year of 1949 witnessed a big fire at the Buddhist temple Hōryū-ji. Consequently, one year later, the Law for the Protection of Cultural Properties emerged and revamped the landscape of cultural heritage protection in the postwar Japan. Under this law of 1950, the national government designates the 'Important Cultural Properties' and the 'National Treasures' (Kakiuchi 2017, 9-13).

and crafts.<sup>30</sup> Prehistoric artefacts such as Jōmon pottery are naturally classified as archaeological materials under the category of fine arts and crafts. Regarding cultural dissemination to the outside world, cultural properties under the National Treasure system are undoubtedly the preferred option. Therefore, from Japan's point of view, the presence of archaeological artefacts in Japanese art exhibitions is not surprising.

## 5 Conclusions

It is nearly three decades since the *Giappone prima dell'Occidente* exhibition came to an end, yet this does not mean that Japan no longer presents archaeological objects and ancient art in Italy. In fact, rather than ambitiously featuring Japanese art in its entirety, the latest exhibitions with the support of the Japan Foundation had more specific subjects, either showing only one archaeological aspect like *Haniwa - Guardians of Eternity from the Fifth to Sixth Centuries* (2002, Palazzo delle Esposizioni, Rome) or dedicated to the arts of a defined period like *Arts in Japan 1868-1945* (2013, Galleria Nazionale d'Arte Moderna, Rome). This tendency reveals their strategy of showing Japanese art in a horizontal rather than vertical sense, in other words, with a shorter time frame yet unfolding the richness of various subjects.

This paper focused on two major exhibitions of Japanese archaeology and ancient art in Italy back, *Tesori dell'Arte Giapponese* (1958-59) and *Il Giappone prima dell'Occidente* (1995-96). Both exhibitions embodied the audacious attempt of massively translocating ancient objects, coming abroad to illustrate a genealogy of artefacts or/and artworks in a historical continuity of Japan. The first difference between the two is that the content of the 1958 exhibition was completely programmed by the Commission for the Protection of Cultural Property in Japan, whereas for the 1995 exhibition, the Italian agency played a remarkable role in organising and curating the exhibition. Following a historical contextualisation of exhibiting Japanese archaeology and ancient art in Italy, a text- and object-based analysis of the exhibits shed light on the narrative of Japanese identity conveyed to Italian visitors in the given time and space. One initial observation is that there has been a tangible shift in describing the artefacts and their respective periods from the 1958 exhibition to that of 1995. This shift can be attributed, in part, to the lack of fundamental archaeological discoveries that occurred only after 1958.

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<sup>30</sup> Agency for Cultural Affairs. <https://www.bunka.go.jp/seisaku/bunkazai/shokai/shitei.html>.

Additionally, it reflects a different perspective on what archaeology represented in the construction of Japanese identity.

Moreover, a lexical transition manifested in the descriptive framework applied to the displayed objects. In 1958, there was a tendency to use orientalist terminology, still defining ancient art as 'primitive' and categorising objects in macro-categories that might not be easily comprehensible to Italian visitors. In 1995, however, a choice was made to exhibit only the category of artefacts related to 'cult and rituals', seemingly asserting the uniqueness of the ancient Japanese period. Nevertheless, the catalogue provides greater historical contextualisation and a better understanding of pre- and proto-historic periods. The narrative of the emerging Japanese identity is closely aligned with the social context and the archaeological vision within which the exhibitions were curated.

Although all the pieces on display have now been returned to their countries of origin, it does not mean that the legacy of these exhibitions has been lost. The narrative and image of Japanese identity encapsulated in these exhibitions still endure, thanks to the catalogues available for purchase and consultation. While it holds true that Italian museums of Asian art lack a comprehensive selection of Japanese art objects to encompass the entirety of Japanese art history, it prompts thoughtful consideration on how to gracefully align their collections with the nuances of a globalised world where the articulation of identity holds growing importance.

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