VORTRAGSREIHE DES INSTITUTS FÜR ETHNOLOGIE

LEITUNG: PHILIPP SCHORCH

Colonial encounters, power asymmetries, and Indigenous agency as documented in the Sámi collection at the Museum of Anthropology and Ethnology, University of Florence

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OBERSEMINAR

Abstract

In the center of Florence, a significant collection of Sámi objects is preserved within the facilities of the local University's Museum of Anthropology and Ethnology. These artifacts were donated to the museum in the late 19th century by physician and anthropologist Paolo Mantegazza and botanist Stephen Sommier, who acquired them during two research stays in Northern Norway.

Despite the historical and cultural significance of this collection, studies on it remain limited, and little information exists regarding the precise provenance and dates of acquisition for most of the objects. However, their histories can be partially reconstructed through the analysis of various sources authored by Mantegazza himself, including archival documents, contemporaneous scientific publications, and anthropological photographs.

This presentation examines a selection of these objects and the processes of their acquisition as documented by the available sources, with the aim of locating instances of colonial violence as well as Indigenous agency and resistance. Particular attention is given to a series of photographs taken in 1879 and 1885, which depict both individual Sámi subjects and scenes of daily life. The analysis investigates how these photographs have been utilized over time in markedly different ways by various institutions and individuals, both in Italy and across Sápmi.

By situating these objects and images within their broader historical and sociocultural contexts, this presentation addresses the entanglement of colonial power dynamics, Indigenous expressions of decolonization, and the role of museums in preserving and communicating cultural heritage.

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