

The majolica collection of the Museum of Bargello

A different approach to the Museum exhibition

Leonardo ZAFFI, University of Florence, Department of Architecture, Italy

Stefania VITI, University of Florence, Department of Architecture, Italy

Keywords: Museum of Bargello, Majolica collection, design of Museums staging, resilience of Museums

Introduction

Nowadays the art exhibitions cannot just show the art collections, but they need to emotionally involve the visitors. The Museums users are not anymore scholars and experts only; many of them are non-specialists, wishful for evocative emotions and multi-disciplinary experiences. These new requirements, together with the need to preserve the art collections from the possible dangers (the time-effects, the natural disasters as much as human attacks), lead the new technology to play a crucial role in the design of the exhibitions layout. The design of a new art exhibition requires the involvement of many different technical and artistic knowledges.

This research is focused on the design of the majolica collection exhibited at Museum of Bargello of Florence, which has been founded in 1865 as first National Museum in Italy. The Museum presents several art collections of high value, very different from each other. Even the displays exhibited at the Museum present a large variety, due to the different properties of the collections to exhibit and to the age of the staging design. Since the Museum foundation to nowadays, indeed, several displays have been followed one another, and some of them have become part of its asset.

The current curators, therefore, have to deal with the double need *i)* to renew the exhibition, in order to guarantee the high profile of the Museum, and to optimize the expressive potentiality of each art good, and *ii)* to protect the art collections, providing to each item the due safety.

The Majolica Room is the next exhibition room which will be renewed in the Museum. The current display goes back to the 80s, and it does not comply anymore to the requirements of the administration. The design of the new exhibition requires a special attention, due to the fragility of the items and to their variety, in terms of shape, dimensions and relevance. The design has been faced within the project RESIMUS, focused on the resilience of art collections, and it has involved the didactical activity of the students belonging to the School of Architecture of Florence.

The Museum of Bargello and the Majolica room

The Museum of Bargello

The building which hosts the Museum of Bargello, shown in Figure 1, is one of the oldest of Florence. Its construction dates back to the middle of XIII century, and it played a crucial role in the politic and social development of the town, until becoming the first Italian National Museum (Giorgi and Matracchi 2006) in 1865. Since then, many exhibitions have occurred; at the current time, the Museum hosts some of the most valuable marble sculptures of the Tuscan Renaissance, besides the majolica and the ivory collections and many other art goods.



Fig. 1. Museum of Bargello: external views.

The Majolica room

The Majolica room, placed at the corner of the first floor of the building (see Figure 2a) was rearranged in 1983, and has been modified several times since then. The room has a quadrangular shape, with a decorative pattern at the top of the lateral walls, along the entire perimeter (see Figure 2b). The entrance is placed in one of the smaller sides, while in one of the longitudinal wall there are two windows.

The staging devices consist of brass and glass windows (Figure 2b,c), placed along the perimeter and in the middle of the room. The collection comprehends all types of ceramics, from apothecary jars, to tableware and decorative pieces, including some items of the rare “Medici porcelain” and a group of pieces from Urbino.



Fig. 2. Majolica room: a) plan of the room within the first floor of the building; b,c) views of the current staging.

The design work

Aims and method

The main aim of the work, still in progress, is the design of a display asset consistent to the architectural features of the building, and suitable to the exhibition of the majolica collection. The display should take into account the main technical contents related to different fields, such as the lighting and plant engineering, the

staging, the artistic value and the safety. All these competences, however, have to deal with the *site-specific* value of the Museum, i.e. the extra-value related to the historical environmental of the collection.

The method selected to approach the design is the involvement of the Museum management; indeed, the main flaws to overcome through the new staging have been pointed out together with the current curator of the collection. Moreover, the project has been developed together with the students of a class of the Architecture School of Florence; in this way, the proposal of the new staging for the Majolica room became a didactical opportunity for the students.

Critical analysis of the current staging

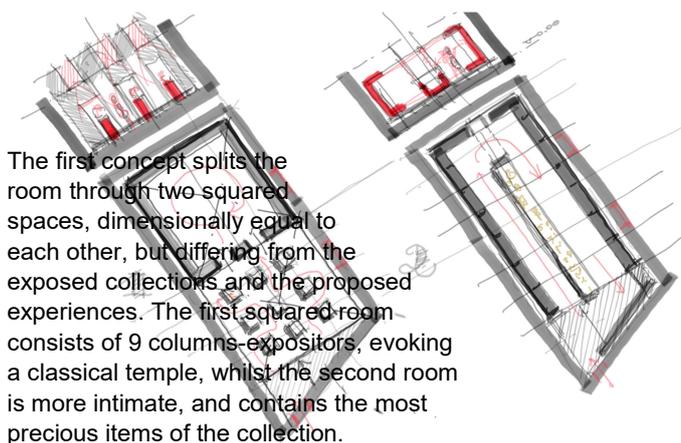
Before starting the design step, a comprehensive analysis of the current setting has been made; the curator of the collection has been available in providing the information regarding the discontent experienced by the Museum operators with the Majolica staging.

The first aspect to improve concerns the lighting of the room, which is in part natural, coming from the two windows, and in part provided by the lighting devices. In all cases the sources of light are diffused, and the consequent soft light does not help the appreciation of the collection.

Another aspect to improve regards the items exposition, which have not a proper hierarchy, so that the visitors cannot understand, without a dedicate effort, which are the most precious objects of the collection. The items, indeed, are exposed, but not highlighted. Furthermore, the windows which contain the items are not adequate to the current standards. They have glass shelves, which do not provide a proper background for the objects (see Figure 2c), and they are difficult to manage, since they are very heavy. They are located along the perimeter and in the middle of the room, according to the criterion of maximizing the expositive surface, but without any balance with the architectural and evocative properties of the room.

The main design criteria

This project provided the opportunity to involve the students in a design process. The design approach dealt with both the specific requirements related to the Bargello's majolica room and more general criteria regarding the Museums' staging. The work developed by the students produced two different concepts, having as much organizational set-up, shown in Figure 3.



The second concept proposes a continuous staging system, based on a basic modulus which is repeated to create the entire device setup. Inside the room there is a long bench which evokes the Medici's table, and their convivial environmental.

Figure 3. The design concepts proposed within the didactical work.

The two design hypotheses, however, present some common choices, which can be resumed as:

- simplification and homogeneity of the expositive system;
- staging devices independent from the architectural contest; the lack of continuity from staging and perimeter walls avoids the interactions between the two systems;

- introduction of an “artificial” floor, which – according to the exhibition standard – stabilizes the expositive system, contains the plant system and leads the introduction of a damping layer below the staging devices to improve their stability;
- exclusion of the natural light coming from the windows, to improve the effectiveness of the light coming from the lighting devices, designed on the basis of the proposed layout (different for the two cases);
- introduction of proper backgrounds, whose colors and materials are chosen to enhance the specific items to show.

The experience has evidenced that, in site-specific Museums, the expositive solution should have its proper evocative effectiveness, and should be able to place side by side with the architectural contest. Architectural contest and staging setup should be independent systems, well distinguishable in their individuality and able to dialog at best with each other.

References

- Giorgi L. and Matracchi P. (2006). *Il Bargello a Firenze. Da Palazzo del Podestà a Museo Nazionale*, in G.Rocchi Coopmans de Yoldi (a cura di), Santa Maria del Fiore. Teorie e storie dell'archeologia e del restauro nella città delle fabbriche arnofiane, Firenze, Alinea, p.125-174.
- Paolozzi Strozzi, Zikos (a cura di), 2011. *L'acqua, la Pietra, il fuoco. Bartolomeo Ammannati Scultore*, ed. Giunti, Firenze.
- Viti S. and Tanganelli M. (2019). Resimus: a research project on the seismic vulnerability of Museums' collections. Proc. 7th Thematic Conference on Computational Methods in Structural Dynamics and Earthquake Engineering (ECCOMAS), M. Papadrakakis, M. Fragiadakis (eds.) Crete, Greece, 24–26 June 2019.
- Capestro A. and Zaffi L. (2018). *Il progetto del temporaneo. Tra ricerca e formazione: dispositivi per l'arte, la cultura, il patrimonio*. Firenze: DIDApres, ISBN:978-88-3338-016-2.