

BOLLETTINO DI ARCHEOLOGIA ON LINE

DIREZIONE GENERALE ARCHEOLOGIA, BELLE ARTI E PAESAGGIO

IL RINNOVATO MUSEO OSTIENSE

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ABSTRACT

The Museum of Ancient Ostia (or Museo Ostiense) was inaugurated in 1934 according to the criteria and taste of the time, after a complex process that began in the mid-nineteenth century. Although the works on display still constitute an essential reference for scholars of the classical world, the building - originally a salt deposit of the papacy - presented serious problems in terms of safety. It was therefore urgent to start its “securing” and a radical renewal of the visit concept.

With special funds from the Ministry (2019), a multidisciplinary group of archaeologists, architects, geologists, engineers, restorers and communicators was set up, and worked in close dialogue with the Scientific Committee of the Park. All aspects of the museum project proceeded at the same time, also using the results of the activities carried out by the Park: the new didactic apparatus, the small thematic exhibitions in the Museum and those organized outside (Finland, Fiumicino-Airport).

The scientific system has been rethought in its components, especially considering the dynamics which have heavily changed the initial layout. The technical conditions of the building have been improved, in order to make them compliant with safety standards and to facilitate full physical - as well as cognitive - accessibility for visitors. The elaborate exhibition itinerary allows a closer connection between the Museum and the city of Ostia and its territory and develops a “storytelling” that combines scientific rigor with the pleasantness of the contents, dedicated to different kinds of public.

The Introduzione generale summarizes the hypotheses and the methodological framework on which the new layout of the Museum is based, within the general context. Mention is made of the broader project of the “Diffused Museum”, that plans to connect the various exhibition points located in the territory of the Park, between Ostia and Fiumicino: the New Antiquarium with its open-air annexes, the Horrea Epagathiana, the Portico of the Theater, the Castle of Pope Julius II and, in Fiumicino, the Ship Museum (reopened at the end of 2021).

The present day Museo Ostiense, alongside the building’s safety and security needs, is planned so as to carry out a cultural operation up to date also in terms of communication of scientific contents (the “storytelling”), making it a point of central information on the ancient city and its territory, accessible to all kinds of public, with particular attention to the disabled.

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The history of the Museum is traced since the original idea of Carlo Fea in the early 19th century, under Pope Pius VII, then resumed by Pope Pius IX, when Pietro Ercole Visconti and Guido Romiti identified in the “Casone del Sale” the ideal location. The former papal deposit was restored and transformed by adding a neoclassical façade, but then the Museum was not set up. After the temporary use of the Castle of Julius II (between 1870 and 1925), Guido Calza and Italo Gismondi finally set the definitive location of the Museo Ostiense in the “Casone” (1934).

The text also takes into account the hypotheses developed for the 1942 Universal Exposition and the exhibition itinerary created immediately after the war, inspired “by both archaeological and aesthetic criteria”. The last organic enlargement project dates back to 1962 (Raissa Calza, Maria Floriani Squarciapino); afterwards, all the subsequent changes did not provide for a systematic plan, compromising the harmony and consistency of the museum.

The new itinerary of visit, consistent with the aim of pointing the different aspects of both city and territory, groups the 12 rooms into 6 thematic sections, privileging - as needed - chronology, context or function, thus abandoning the previous monochromatism of marble. Furthermore, each museum section includes a definite context or at least part of it.

Section One introduces the Archaeological Park, framing the life and development of the first Roman colony with multimedia systems and a space dedicated to audio-video projections (home theater). All videos are also made in LIS and BLS languages; consideration for the needs of disabled visitors underlies the entire project.

Section Two, “The Origins and the Republican Age”, offers a narration focused on the Castrum and the extra-urban sanctuary in Via della Foce (the earlier phase of the territory will be on display in the New Antiquarium), also highlighting the phenomena of monumentalization of the most ancient cults.

Section Three (Rooms V-VII) is dedicated to the city. Objects illustrate the theme of the colony’s monuments and public buildings, emphasizing the relationship with Rome and the dialogue between central power and local élites. There are statues and portraits of the imperial families, originally placed in public spaces, underlining the rôle of the emperors who dedicated care and attention to Ostia. The selected objects are historically relevant, such as the inscription and the winged statue of Minerva from Porta Romana, the Fasti Ostienses, fragments of the Basilica del Foro and the Temple of Augustus, which can also be read with the aid of special reconstructions. The theme of the “people” of Ostia is introduced by the statue of Cartilius Poplicola, with the partial reconstruction of his mausoleum. A significant selection of portraits follows, from the Republican age until Late Antiquity, including the “middle class”, very active in the city.

In Section Four the theme of the religions and cults of the colony is dealt with, finally bringing together the gods of the classical pantheon (frieze Ostia-Berlin, Vulcan, Hercules etc.) and the oriental divinities. Foreign cults, assimilated and spread locally, are illustrated by statues of divinities such as Mithras tauroctonos, Isis and Serapis, and by various objects from the sanctuary of the Magna Mater (representations of Attis among them) as well as the reliefs of the Archigallus), without neglecting the two great monotheistic religions, attested in Ostia.

Section Five (Rooms IX-X-XI) offers an overview of the necropoleis of the Ostian territory, with a specific attention to Isola Sacra. A selection of cinerary urns, sarcophagi, altars, inscriptions, statues, reliefs, paintings and mosaics are exhibited, presenting the forms of burial according to the reference models, including figurative repertoires of classical derivation. Focal points are the sarcophagus from Pianabella with scenes from the Iliad, the Tomb of Julia Procula and the splendid sarcophagus of the Muses, including its funerary equipment.

Section Six develops the theme of living, dividing the vast room XII into three thematic and/or contextual itineraries according to a predominantly chronological criterion, combined with the reconstruction of some contexts of provenance, with particular attention to paintings and decorative revêtements. The description of the city buildings starts from the end of the Republic (oecus dei Nani) down to the imperial age, with a focus on the Domus della Fortuna Annonaria with its statues. The middle-imperial age is illustrated by conspicuous examples of paintings, found all over the city; by the exhibition of important late-antique pieces (e.g. group of Cupid and Psyche) and with the evocation of a small library, decorated with portraits of Greek persons.

The visit to the Museum ends with the setting up of a multimedia station dedicated to the opus sectile decorated building at Porta Marina (now reconstructed at MAME).

As for the restoration of the planned 190 objects to be exhibited, all in different conservation conditions and often without updated technical data sheets, the criterion of minimum intervention was followed, analyzing previous interventions and paying great attention to the structural problems and presentation of the artifacts. Given the different treatments, the use of “temporal analogy” criteria has allowed us to go back to the interventions of the early 20th century.

The second part illustrates the technical project in the various aspects of the museum building, originally built in the 16th century with a different function, characterized by a very poor masonry technique and plant engineering systems very far from the modern functionality and safety requirements. Technical contributions are here introduced by a methodological foreword on the definition of the assessments to be made and the objectives to be achieved, especially in a continuously “rearranged” building.

The architectural project of the new Museo Ostiense aims to enhance the exhibits by acting on different elements: chromatism, materials, natural and artificial light, supports, geometry of spaces and architectural elements. The recovery of some characters of the original 20th century layout (1934-1962) was accompanied by new ideas that “free” the works from the background, restoring visibility and plastic strength. Metal substructures and wall coverings solve structural and humidity problems, also avoiding unpleasant visual impacts by hiding the plant ducts in the plasterboard. Even in the floors, old and new solutions alternate, “saving” the antique polychrome marble carpets set up by Calza. Particular attention was paid to the supports, of simple and pure geometry, individually designed for perfect adhesion to the artifacts on display.

The lighting system was totally redesigned, resolving the contrasts between natural and artificial light, particularly evident in a building with skylights, but without windows. Even inside the more crowded rooms, such as that of the “people of Ostia”, the theme of accessibility plays an important rôle: only a single itinerary was designed, accessible to both able and disabled people.

Finally, the safety study was an important element of the renovation project and concerned all the phases of the planned work.