

Marconi & CO. Gli oggetti del Museo raccontano l'altra storia del wireless

A Podcast Series and an Experimental Audio Exhibition

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Museum anniversaries are often remembered in the most obvious form: an exhibition dedicated to the person or event being celebrated. The 2024 anniversary offered the opportunity to experiment with a hybrid approach, translating the traditional museum format into a podcast.

This format, like all 'new media', has immediately achieved considerable success in the museum sector,¹ as one of the numerous phases in the long process of museums 'mediatization', which has accompanied these institutions since the 1900s. If we indeed observe the history of media technology in this perspective, we cannot forget that museums do not only document and narrate the history of communication, but they always take an active part in it. Well before digitalization, museums have used a variety of media to carry out their work often creatively reinventing uses, languages and devices.²

In the case of podcasts, every product developed in the museum context thus reinterprets the relationship between sound discourse and the institution in its own way, focusing on various aspects and possibilities: guided exhibition tours, broadening of the historical

¹ Black, H. (2020). "What Makes a Good Museum Podcast?". In *practice*, Museum Association. <https://www.museum-association.org/museums-journal/in-practice/2020/04/21042020-what-makes-a-good-museum-podcast/>. On the podcast phenomenon see Bonini, T.; Perrotta, M. (2023). *Che cos'è un podcast*. Roma: Carocci.

² Drotner, K.; Dziekan, V.; Parry, R.; Schröder, K.C. (eds) (2020). *The Routledge Handbook of Museums, Media and Communication*. London; New York: Routledge; Taylor & Francis Group. Griffiths, A. (2008). *Shivers Down Your Spine: Cinema, Museums, and the Immersive View. Film and Culture*. New York: Columbia University Press.

context, biographies of the artefacts, oral histories and interviews, and so on.³

This way, the podcast aims to bring the direct encounter with museum collections into the audio dimension, an experience usually entrusted to the sense of sight, and in rare cases, touch. In sum, we experimented with the transformation of the exhibition visit into an aural experience.

The choice was motivated by different reasons.

Since 2020, all the professional sectors operating within MUST have undertaken a collaborative project to reflect on their work practices in relation to the themes of diversity, inclusion, accessibility, and equity. Over the course of 2024 a special opportunity arose to engage in dialogue with a community of visually impaired and blind people. This exchange provided the impetus to discuss the centrality of sight as the main channel to experience the cultural offerings of the museum, and consequently, the historical artefacts and guided tours of the museum exhibitions.

Secondly, the occasion of the anniversary was the stimulus for elaborating new research criteria on the collections linked to Marconi (see Introduction).

So, in 2024 it was premature to rethink the historical exhibition of Marconi relics, with still uncertain research outcomes. The more agile podcast format allowed the addition of another layer of interpretation to the existing

exhibition: flexible, ubiquitous, and not limited to physical presence in museum spaces. We felt it to be an appropriate tribute both to mobile communication, a consequence of the invention of wireless technology, and to the radiophonic medium that emerged from it. Interestingly, 2024 marked another national anniversary: 100 years since the first radio transmission by a public broadcaster – the URI, *Unione Radiofonica Italiana* (Italian Radiophonic Union), which took place on 6 October 1924.

Lastly, the podcast has made it possible to seamlessly integrate and directly present to the public the many voices of academics, and also community representatives, who are advising the Museum on how to reinterpret its own artefacts according to the updated historiographical criteria presented in the volume, linking history and memory. It represents also a special form of museum publication.

The voices that intermingle in the podcast take listeners on a journey through alternative narratives of the historical events that involve Marconi: if we compare these stories to those that have been fixed in the collective imagination by the past interpretation of Marconi relics, they provide more historical detail and context, showing the collective endeavour of wireless communication social construction.

Here is an overview of the project.

³ MUST already had two active podcasts dedicated to the collections: *Gallerie Leonardo da Vinci* (2020), curated by Claudio Giorgione, and *La scoperta del cielo* (2020), curated by Luca Reduzzi.

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The podcast is available for listening on the most important audio platforms and on the museum website (Italian only):
<https://www.museoscienza.org/it/podcast/marconi-e-co>

Credits

Editorial coordination by Simona Casonato

Texts by Simona Casonato, Roberta Spada, Carlo Annese, Enrico Racca

Audio Editing and Coordination by Giulia Pacchiarini

Editing by Federico Caruso

Production by Carlo Annese

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Episode Summaries

1. "Hills and Oceans: The Man Who Didn't Invent Radio"

To understand how the story of wireless communication technologies really began, it is useful to broaden our perspective: from the tale of a brilliant boy who invented the radio in the Bolognese hills to the story of a powerful maritime empire, which, even before Marconi and the *Titanic*, considered the safety of oceans around the world.

Gabriele Balbi, Anna Guagnini, Carlo Maisano, Leonardo Merlini, Peppino Ortoleva

2. "Shipowners and Radio Amateurs: How Broadcasting Began"

Radio broadcasting began because of what Marconi defined as a 'flaw' in wireless telegraphy. It was difficult to precisely tune two devices: others succeeded in receiving transmissions or accessing naval communications. Many tinkerers took advantage of this flaw to create a new means of communication: the radio.

Gabriele Balbi, Anna Guagnini

3. "Myth & History: The Museum Life of Objects"

Let us discover the legend of Marconi. The story of technological inventions often merges myth and history. But how can we tell the difference between them? Objects and documents from museums and archives help us, but often they too are also products of myths. The important thing is to know how to interpret historical artefacts.

Elena Canadelli, Peppino Ortoleva, Giovanni Paoloni, Paolo Volontè

4. "Scientists and Collaborators: The Alliance that Created Wireless"

Science and technology are collective endeavours. To create wireless technology, Marconi reasoned and acted alongside so many of his peers: people who discovered scientific laws; who built, tested, used and modified devices; who defended them in court; who lauded their innovation, promoting or evaluating them all over the world.

Elizabeth Bruton, Anna Guagnini, Nicolas Maupas, Barbara Valotti, Alessandro Vanelli Coralli

5. "Empires and Colonies: How Marconi Became a Global Enterprise"

To truly understand the story of the Italian-Irish Marconi, it's necessary to look at the network of companies that bore his name: a true global brand for an *ante litteram* big tech multinational. The Marconi Company was irrevocably linked to the geopolitical aims of its country of origin, Great Britain and its Empire.

Paolo Bory, Marc Raboy, Laura Ronzon

6. "Country & Business: The Scientific Supremacy of Mussolini"

Let us go back to where we started: to Italy, where the business of the Marconi Company was directly overseen by Guglielmo, who returned after the World War and found the fascist government to be a valuable ally. As president of the CNR (National Research Council) and the Royal Academy of Italy, Marconi was able to establish his everlasting fame as a worldwide champion of Italian science.

Gabriele Balbi, Riccardo Chiaberge, Simone Natale, Giovanni Paoloni, Marc Raboy

Guests in Alphabetical Order

Gabriele Balbi* USI – Università della Svizzera Italiana a Lugano

Paolo Bory Politecnico di Milano

Elizabeth Bruton University College, Dublin

Elena Canadelli Università degli Studi di Padova, President of Società Italiana di Storia della Scienza

Riccardo Chiaberge Cultural journalist, author of *Wireless. Scienza, amori e avventure di Guglielmo Marconi* (Garzanti, 2024, 2nd ed.)

Anna Guagnini* Independent scholar

Carlo Maisano Emergency, mission chief Life Support

Nicolas Maupas Actor, plays the young Marconi in the fictional mini-series *Marconi – L'uomo che ha connesso il mondo* (Rai 1)

Leonardo Merlini Rear Admiral of Marina Militare Italiana, Director of Museo Tecnico Navale di La Spezia

Simone Natale Università degli Studi di Torino

Peppino Ortoleva Scholar of the history and theory of means of communication

Giovanni Paoloni* La Sapienza Università di Roma, member of Accademia Nazionale delle Scienze

Marc Raboy McGill University, Montréal, Canada, author of *Marconi. L'uomo che ha connesso il mondo* (Hoepli, 2024)

Laura Ronzon Collections Director, Museo Nazionale Scienza e Tecnologia Leonardo da Vinci

Barbara Valotti Head of museum activities, Fondazione Guglielmo Marconi

Alessandro Vanelli Coralli Università degli Studi di Bologna

Paolo Volonté Politecnico di Milano, META Coordinator – Unità di studi umanistici e sociali su scienza e tecnologia

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