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"Making Italians" by Exhibiting the Italian School: School and Teaching Objects at the first Great National Exhibitions of Unified Italy

«Hacer italianos» mediante la exhibición de la escuela italiana: la escuela y los objetos didácticos en las primeras grandes exposiciones nacionales de la Italia unificada

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Keywords

Great National Exhibitions
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ABSTRACT: This article aims to analyse the first great Italian National Exhibitions in the years immediately following the profound transformation brought about by the birth of Italy itself through the unification process of 1861. The showcase represented by these Exhibitions is used to "read" the elements that can reveal the role attributed to schooling during this delicate phase of constructing a new national identity. At the same time, the article seeks to understand who the agents and materials are that promote the image of schooling within the "showcase" represented by the National Exhibitions. Tracing the evolution of the Italian school system through the lens of its representation in these exhibitions makes it possible to highlight the role of the Exhibitions both as a source for historical research and as a crossroads for multiple interpretive perspectives.

Palabras clave

Grandes Exposiciones Nacionales
Objetos escolares
Siglo XIX
Materialidad escolar

RESUMEN: Este artículo tiene como objetivo analizar las primeras grandes Exposiciones Nacionales italianas en los años inmediatamente posteriores a la profunda transformación provocada por el nacimiento de Italia a través del proceso de unificación de 1861. El escaparate representado por estas Exposiciones se utiliza como una clave de lectura para identificar los elementos que permiten comprender el papel atribuido a la escolarización durante esta delicada fase de construcción de una nueva identidad nacional. Al mismo tiempo, el artículo busca identificar quiénes son los agentes y los materiales que promueven la imagen de la escolarización dentro del "escaparate" que representan las Exposiciones Nacionales. Rastrear la evolución del sistema escolar italiano a través del prisma de su representación en estas exposiciones permite poner de relieve el papel de las Exposiciones tanto como fuente para la investigación histórica como como encrucijada de múltiples perspectivas interpretativas.

1. INTRODUCTION

In March 1861, Italy became a single unified nation. The territory that had previously consisted of seven different states (the Kingdom of Sardinia; the Austro-Hungarian Empire; the Papal States; the Kingdom

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of the Two Sicilies; the Grand Duchy of Tuscany; the Duchy of Parma and Piacenza; and the Duchy of Modena and Reggio) was now, politically, a single entity. Geographical differences were compounded by deep historical divergences, as well as, naturally, political and administrative ones. From practical issues such as the unification of weights and measures to more identity-related matters such as language, and including government regulations, everything needed to be standardised—but more importantly, made understandable and acceptable to citizens.

In this delicate transitional moment, the Exhibitions were seen as an ideal tool: an opportunity to publicly display the characteristics of the newly unified Italy. These events pursued a dual objective: on the one hand, to display —and thus legitimise and give value to— the new defining elements of a unified country (industry, art, natural products...); and on the other, to use the Exhibition as a showcase to disseminate and make those elements known.

The exhibition moment, and particularly the major National Exhibition, was understood at that time as a truly political act (Macdonald, 1998; Olmo & Aimone, 1990; Abbattista, 2014; Coglitore, 2014). In this case, however, the political message was not addressed to foreign powers or intended to stake a claim internationally but rather aimed inward: to send a signal to the country itself and to help forge a new shared imaginary.

One might go so far as to say that, in those first National Exhibitions, the objects on display were of secondary importance compared to the primary objective: not so much to showcase the development of the local economy, but rather to communicate that Italy had become a single, unified nation.

> Ma un bisogno più potente, una ragione più intima, una ispirazione più nobile che la semplice ricchezza di produzione promoveva la Esposizione italiana. Era la ragion politica, la quale voleva subito vedere il recente trionfo dell'unità incarnato in un grande fatto. [...] L'Esposizione, proclamata l'unità d'Italia, appariva come un atto che dava compimento effettivo all'opera straordinaria della costituzione della patria. (Relazione generale, 1867, p. 5)

In other words, beyond what they concretely exhibited, the Exhibitions also had a significance that was perhaps more abstract, but certainly broader in scope and greater in impact:

> [Queste Esposizioni avevano] il triplice obiettivo di organizzazione del consenso alla nazione, di inventario delle forze produttive e di adesione alla politica dei ceti di governo; la finalità didascalica e didattica, per plasmare ai valori borghesi quelle classi lavoratrici che premevano dal basso per partecipare alla decisioni relative alla cosa pubblica; l'ideologia interclassista, alla ricerca illusoria della pace sociale e di un equilibrio perfetto tra capitale e lavoro; la celebrazione della borghesia attraverso l'esaltazione del progresso e la spettacolarità dei prodigi della scienza e della tecnica. (Levra & Roccia, 2005, XVI)

It is certainly no coincidence that the first national exhibition was organised just six months after the proclamation of Italian unification, and at the initiative of the scientist Quintino Sella, who at the time was serving as Secretary General at the Ministry of Public Education and who, in 1862, would become Minister of Finance.

In other words, it is as though the very concept of "exhibiting" a set of objects underwent a profound shift in meaning: the earliest exhibitions organised by nobles, intellectuals, scholars, or travellers were undoubtedly driven by a desire to astonish, and subsequently to educate and to disseminate knowledge—moving from a public of a few selected individuals to a broader, more widespread audience (Bennett, 1995; Pomian, 2001;

Cazzani, 2006). Certainly, the notion that those who exhibited objects were also, through this act, displaying their own "power" (be it political, economic, or intellectual...) has always been intrinsic to the practice. However, in those earlier contexts, this power had a more personal purpose than what it would come to assume with the type of exhibition under discussion here.

The first *Wunderkammern* or "cabinets of curiosities" (Impey & MacGregor, 1985; Hooper-Greenhill, 1992; Findlen, 1994) offered a select few viewers curious, rare, precious, or previously unseen and unknown objects, often originating from distant lands and cultures. It was the Renaissance that initiated this specific understanding of "exhibition", which continued into the seventeenth and even eighteenth centuries, when *mirabilia, naturalia,* and *artificialia* were displayed before a narrow elite with the intention not of teaching, nor of disseminating knowledge or promoting industrial or professional development, but rather of inspiring wonder and amazement. These early collections reflected a concept of accumulation, of collecting—often indiscriminate and lacking any systematic methodological basis—intended to entertain the privileged viewer who was granted access.

The transition from this understanding of "exhibition" to one that came to represent, on the one hand, an opportunity for scientific study (academic museums), and on the other, a means of dissemination for a broader audience (public museums), was fully realised in the eighteenth century. From the mare magnum of objects amassed —at times compulsively— in the *Wunderkammern,* there emerged a thematic and disciplinary subdivision (mineral museums, mechanical museums, art museums, and so on) that would lead to a desire for classification and in-depth exploration of the technical and scientific knowledge underlying each field—an endeavour that would reach its peak in the positivist culture of the nineteenth century.

At the same time, the very notion of the public began to change from a few privileged individuals or specialist experts, a new idea of the potential user of collections developed, along with new understandings of both the meaning and role of the owner exhibiting the collection and of the audience engaging with it (Volpe, 2001; Montanari, 2002; Bencivenni, 2011).

A further shift in meaning occurred in the nineteenth century, the period under discussion here, regarding the act of "exhibition" through the development of the practice of both National and Universal Exhibitions. Beyond the fact that these events took place over a limited period of time, there was no longer a single owner presenting their private collection, but rather a plurality of actors —often very diverse— who contributed to shaping a vision of the contemporary world. In other words, the National or Universal Exhibition aimed to offer a "snapshot" of the state of development of various thematic sectors up to that point, and to showcase excellence and innovation in different fields.

As mentioned, there remained the underlying intention to communicate specific messages (intellectual power, moral strength, economic force, political authority, etc.), but the perspective had changed. The new aims were education, progress, and propaganda, and these were pursued by offering an organised spectacle, rational and encyclopaedic in structure, in which progress and modernity became key elements for exhibiting to a mass audience on both national and international scales (Greenhalgh, 1988; Aymes, 1995; Findling & Pelle, 2008).

The Exhibition, from the moment of its nineteenth-century birth and affirmation, thus inherently carried with it a meaning as a political, pedagogical, and industrial tool. The act of exhibiting within the great Exhibitions became a means of displaying one's self-image and of "prefiguring the future" (Lawn, 2009).

In light of this epistemological evolution underlying the act of "exhibiting", in order to gain an understanding of the state of education in post-unification Italy—such as the availability of teaching aids, the presence and vitality of individual educational institutions, the development of the school system and its ministerial provisions—and at the same time to understand the image of schooling that one wished to convey in

relation to the role attributed to education in the construction of a newly unified country, a valid litmus test is undoubtedly represented by the new and significant moments offered by the first National Exhibitions (Caracciolo, 1990). What “place” was assigned to schooling within these national showcases? And how was it represented?

An analysis of the first Italian National Exhibitions of the late nineteenth century can provide elements to answer these questions. The complete list of such events in that historical period includes editions in 1861 in Florence; 1871 in Milan; 1881 in Milan; 1884 in Turin; 1891 in Palermo; and 1898 in Turin. Since the 1880s mark, at the international level, the full affirmation of pedagogical positivism —and with it the centrality of school objects as the foundation of widespread objective teaching— this article will focus on the first four National Exhibitions in order to fully understand the role of such displays in promoting education within the new unified Italy (Picone Petrusa, Pessolano, Bianco, 1988).

2. THE ROLE OF SCHOOLING IN NINETEENTH-CENTURY ITALIAN NATIONAL EXHIBITIONS

If the overall purpose of the National Exhibition was to make Italians themselves understand that they were now all citizens of the same, newly unified territory, then schooling—especially in the post-unification period—had precisely the same objective. In fact, school was identified as the ideal means of shaping the new Italians, and as the most effective tool for achieving the goal of standardising the language, knowledge of weights and measures, currency, and raising the level of literacy. Through what has been called “a law for unified Italy” (De Fort, 1996, p. 58) —referring to the extension to the entire national territory of the school law previously adopted in Piedmont— elementary education was made compulsory and free for both boys and girls.

However, serious disparities between the various regions, structural deficiencies, economic limitations, and the lack of adequately trained teaching staff, in addition to intense political debate (Catarsi, 1988; Genovesi, 2006; Di Pol, 2016), were just some of the major obstacles that undermined the capacity of schooling to serve as a true unifying force for the population, and at the same time to elevate cultural preparation to a uniform national level.

Yet beyond the actual conditions of the Italian school system, it is possible to trace how schooling was represented, and to reconstruct the role it assumed over the course of the nineteenth century within the major Italian National Exhibitions. To do so, three specific indicators —or rather, three distinct analytical lenses— will be considered, each of which, in our view, reveals a key aspect of the contemporary state of education and of how it was represented in exhibition contexts. The presence of schooling will thus be examined through the organisational choices made in curating exhibition sections devoted to education (section 2.1); the subjects responsible for exhibiting schooling (section 2.2); and the educational objects that were displayed (section 2.3).

2.1. How to “Display” Schooling in Unified Italy

The first great Italian National Exhibition was thus organised in Florence in 1861 (Commissione Reale, 1861). Beyond the decision to create an exhibition, the central issue for this first event became how to display —or, more precisely, how to organise— the exhibition. Behind this simple “how” lies the hierarchy of objectives that the organisers intended to attribute to the exhibition, or, in other words, the messages

that they aimed to communicate and highlight through this event. For this reason, the debates concerning the categories and classes of exhibits became highly significant. The structure of the categories used to organise the materials on display inherently reflects the worldview the organisers sought to convey, revealing what they considered important and what they did not.

For the first Italian Exhibition of 1861, the decision was made to adopt the same principles used in the first universal exhibitions, which, after all, had not begun many years earlier: in London in 1851 and in Paris in 1855, 24 exhibition classes had been selected "according to those relations which, besides making the collections more interesting, also allow more easily the establishment of a comparative judgement on the relative merit of the said products" (*ibid.,* p. 17).

At the opening of the Italian Exhibition in Florence, schooling was therefore not assigned a class of its own, but its presence could nonetheless be traced, albeit in a non-organic way. Class IX, dedicated to "precision mechanics and physics," included a third section entirely devoted to teaching materials, which were in turn divided into three subsections: 1) maps, globes, etc.; 2) calculating machines; 3) objects not included in the previous sections. Another subcategory dedicated to "education, instruction, and recreation" could be found as the sixth section of Class XXI, entitled "Economic Gallery." This class gathered together "products intended for the use of the less affluent classes, and which are distinguished by low cost, quality of workmanship, or widespread commercial distribution" (*ibid.,* p. 21). In other words, this section assembled what we might today call "consumer goods," in a *mare magnum* that characterised the class as a collection of non-prestigious objects of mixed nature, as indeed confirmed by the topics of the other subsections: housing and construction; furniture and domestic objects; clothing and linen; food; tools and implements for manual labour. Alongside all these categories, there was also a small space devoted to "books, materials for schools, etc."

It is evident from this subdivision that, in 1861, schooling did not yet have the strength to occupy a true, autonomous exhibition category. Not only did education not yet possess a sufficiently significant number of materials to display, but it probably had also not yet acquired, at a shared societal level, an identity strong enough to legitimise an entire dedicated category with clearly defined characteristics. Tracing the development of the "space" allocated to schooling within the Exhibitions makes it possible to follow a path of affirmation of the role of education and the meaning attributed to it. Moreover, based on the physical space occupied, one may deduce the growth of a broader and more mature educational production—one that justifies the allocation of dedicated exhibition areas.

It would take another ten years —until 1871— for the second Italian National Exhibition to be held, this time in Milan. The exhibition structure appeared different, organised entirely around eight exhibition classes, each subdivided into subclasses (*Guida ufficiale,* 1871). Yet none of these classes was still devoted to schooling. The turning point came only after another ten years: exactly twenty years after the Unification of Italy and the first National Exhibition, education finally found its legitimate space within the exhibition.

The 1881 Exhibition, once again held in Milan, was divided into eleven groups (comprising sixty-six subclasses), with the eleventh group specifically dedicated to "education, technical instruction, welfare, and charity" (*Relazione generale,* 1883, p. 17). This specific section included as many as 759 exhibitors and was assigned a covered exhibition area of 2,400 square metres.

Within this Group XI, Class 62 was dedicated to higher technical education, while Class 63 was intended for vocational, industrial, and applied arts schools. Exhibitors in these subclasses were invited to participate with a wide range of materials, illustrating everything from the school building itself to the subjects taught; from student-produced works to statistics on the performance of individual institutions or municipalities; from the teaching materials used to the description of selected pedagogical methods;

and from institutional statutes to disciplinary regulations. Still within the same exhibition group XI, Classes 64 and 66 were dedicated to welfare and charitable institutions. These classes explicitly included kindergartens, popular and circulating libraries, institutions for the blind and deaf-mute, for abandoned or “delinquent” children, and so on. Class 65, instead, was dedicated to technical schools and lower-level technical institutes.

As is clearly evident from the classification adopted, there does not appear to be a clearly defined place for “school and didactic materials,” nor for the representation of elementary schooling. However, this initial choice must have been deemed counterproductive, since a letter from the Commission for Group XI, dated 20 January 1881, seems to intervene to correct the “narrow interpretation of the programme of this exhibition group” and to establish a new “Special Commission” tasked with inviting schools and manufacturers of didactic objects to take part in the Exhibition (*Relazione generale,* 1883).

Thus, for the first time, in 1881, specific and deliberate attention was devoted to didactic objects and their producers—whether schools or specialised companies. This date does not seem accidental: it falls at the beginning of the decade in which pedagogical positivism would assert itself more strongly in Italy (Bauselli, 1880; Catarsi, 1988; Chiosso, 2015; Brunelli, 2020), and which would mark the development of the school supply industry (Meda, 2016; Pizzigoni, 2022), with an increasingly widespread presence of didactic materials in the methodological and pedagogical debate.

If 1881 was the year in which a new, autonomous exhibition category dedicated to schooling first emerged within the National Exhibitions, only three years later, the great General Exhibition organised in Turin saw the explosion of this sector. For the first time, one of the eight general sections was entirely devoted to schooling—or, more precisely, to what, for the first time within such a nationally scoped exhibition context, appeared under the name (*Esposizione generale italiana,* 1884).

The true “explosion” of this exhibition sector is demonstrated by the specific internal structure with which it was organised. Indeed, the choice to divide it into classes, each in turn subdivided into sections, and each section into categories, allows us today to gain an overall view of how the “world of schooling” and its components were perceived by contemporaries. The 1884 Exhibition, through this organisational structure, thus marked the nationwide development of sensitivity toward the educational sphere and the identity attributed to it, and simultaneously offered a snapshot of the stage of evolution that had been reached (the choice to dedicate, for example, a specific section to school hygiene reflects the full affirmation of this aspect in the public discourse). As previously mentioned, in order to complete the overview of the nineteenth-century Italian National Exhibitions, one must also take into account the 1891 edition held in Palermo—which, in reality, suffered overall from a lack of success, with limited ability to attract both exhibitors and visitors. This may have been due, at least in part, to a transportation and communication system that was not yet sufficiently developed to facilitate exchanges with the island of Sicily.

It is, however, with the 1884 exhibition that the role of schooling on display —whether in the effort to “make Italians” or, more broadly, to complete the process of affirming the school system and its role within unified Italy— reaches its apex.

Indeed, in that exhibition, not only is the full range of school levels and types called upon to exhibit, but also the breadth of educational aspects represented is fully developed: from furnishings to didactic aids, from school buildings to institutional regulations, from pedagogy to laboratory spaces, from images of schools and their “inhabitants” to statistical data, and so on.

2.2. Who Exhibits Schooling

In order to understand the evolution of the representation of schooling as revealed through its presence in the nineteenth-century Italian National Exhibitions—and at the same time to grasp which actors considered themselves protagonists in the construction of the school system during that historical moment—it may be significant to outline the types of subjects who brought educational materials to the exhibitions. This specific analytical perspective does not focus on the political-institutional image of schooling that the organisers intended to convey—as was the case in the previous consideration, which examined the structural representation of schooling through the allocation and internal organisation of categories and sections—but rather on the more or less spontaneous protagonists who contributed to shaping the various components of the contemporary representation of schooling. In the immediate aftermath of Unification, during the first National Exhibition of 1861, it was mostly private citizens who presented schooling through its material manifestations. It was not the schools themselves, nor the municipalities, who exhibited —as would become the case in later editions— since their new role, acquired with Unification, was evidently not yet fully recognised or internalised. Indeed, the national school law made municipalities directly responsible for elementary education (in terms of providing facilities, teachers, furnishings, and basic materials). Individual public schools, therefore —already facing major economic hardship (Montecchi, 2015) —most likely did not yet perceive themselves as potential agents capable of producing or promoting educational materials. Even specialised firms such as printing houses or publishers of school manuals did not appear as key participants. It is mostly individual authors who exhibit—figures who, far from being "simple" elementary school teachers (as will become clearer especially from the 1880s onward), are highly specialised experts in specific disciplinary fields and who produce materials for schools that were, in fact, originally conceived for other uses. This is the case, for example, of military geographers such as Major Martino Cellai from Florence, or the well-known Pietro Giusti from Siena, an internationally renowned woodcarver who had also received awards at the first International Exhibition in London, and who adapted his art and products to the educational context. Another example is Salvatore Castellani from Pistoia, who was actually a paper manufacturer. In all these cases, the exhibitors were individuals who were not directly connected to the school world, yet who nonetheless chose to exhibit in the sections dedicated to education at this first National Exhibition in 1861. Publishers, although present at the exhibition, preferred to present their work in sections distinct from those dedicated to education, limiting their participation to aspects of a purely technical-typographical nature (*Commissione Reale,* 1861). The evolving perception of the school theme within the exhibition space —by those involved in the education sector who gradually began to consider themselves as potential exhibitors— can be traced by observing the changes in exhibitor types at the 1871 National Exhibition. Here, schools began to play a more prominent role, exhibiting primarily the didactic outcomes of their activities, understood as the product of students' hands-on and laboratory-based work. In this way, they demonstrated how their educational practices contributed to the acquisition of practical and professional skills and, as a result, supported economic development. These were not schools seeking to emphasise their primary mission, which at the time (according to the ministerial programmes in place) was primarily focused on teaching "reading, writing, and arithmetic," but rather their practical outcomes. The individual authors present as exhibitors continued to be recognised professionals, often active in fields adjacent to formal education, and were typically secondary school teachers. Although formally listed in the exhibition section dedicated to printing, the publishers present began to highlight those products specifically intended for use in schools. While Treves and Paggi —both known at the time to be involved in the production of school textbooks— chose not to display such materials at the exhibition, the situation was different in the case of Vallardi and Paravia, who did include school textbooks and geographical maps for educational use (*Guida Ufficiale,* 1871). The presence and role of educational institutions within the National Exhibitions was definitively consolidated with the 1881 edition in Milan, when an entire class (Class 63)

was dedicated to vocational and industrial schools (*Esposizione industriale italiana,* 1881). Another class (Class 66) was devoted to kindergartens and schools for disabled pupils, and yet another (Class 65) to technical schools. Materials began to appear at the exhibition that aimed to illustrate the didactic methods employed, the results achieved, statistical data, but also school buildings and furnishings—thus expanding the conception of what "school on display" might entail. Still predominant were examples of schools exhibiting samples of student work (drawings, needlework, examples of manual labour, models). However, there was also a growing presence of schoolbook authors, and for the first time, a kindergarten teacher was among the exhibitors: Ms. Emilie Kuhne of Bordighera. Another significant first among the exhibitors in the educational sector was the presence of a pedagogical museum: the Pedagogical Museum of Genoa, though established only a few years earlier, already positioned itself as a key player in shaping the public image of education and, above all, in directing the concept of schooling as presented to the broader public through the showcase offered by the National Exhibition (Innocenti-Ghini, 1883). The role of museums intersected, for the first time, in a meaningful way with the educational and scholastic life of the country: another type of museum also exhibited in this section. This was the Merchandising Museum of Turin, which presented a special collection of leathers, thus initiating the practice of classification and the display of samples—a practice that would become characteristic of educational use linked to the dissemination of objective teaching, driven by pedagogical positivism. In this 1881 Exhibition, even municipalities themselves —evidently now fully aware of their role in the national expansion of education— chose to present materials in the exhibition, as did, for example, the Municipality of Verona. Another significant addition among the new exhibitors in the educational sector was a private company which, based on its corporate designation (Engineering Company), might have been expected to participate in other exhibition sections, but which instead chose to present products in the category dedicated to education—products that one would not ordinarily associate with a technical firm, such as:

> collezione degli oggetti e preparati per l'insegnamento della storia naturale, collezioni speciali di mineralogica, geologia, botanica etc., collezioni speciali di entomologia, erbari speciali, scheletri montati, collezioni tecnologiche e merceologiche, tavole, quadri murali. (Catalogo generale, 1883, p. 430)

Another notable aspect of this turning point among educational exhibitors in 1881 is represented by publishing houses which, rather than simply including their school-related materials within broader exhibition categories more closely aligned with their sector of production, chose instead to multiply their presence by specifically highlighting the disciplinary-educational fields touched by their output. The publishing house Paravia, for example, in addition to participating in the section dedicated to printing, also entered the didactic section, specifying the now well-defined and differentiated nature of its products, and placing particular emphasis on its didactic materials—especially for the teaching of nomenclature and history—no longer including them, as before, in a single, more generic group of "typographical products".

The line drawn in the 1881 Exhibition concerning the typology of exhibitors in the school section was confirmed in the 1884 Turin edition, which in fact marked the definitive consolidation of two major groups of educational exhibitors: teachers on the one hand, and publishers on the other. Their "exhibition identity", if we may use this term, in relation to the purpose with which they contributed to the theme of "school on display", evolved and established clear boundaries. These very identity boundaries suggest to us the image of schooling at the time—how it presented itself and how it wished to influence the future of education.

The principal materials in this exhibition section became didactic objects, marking a shift from the two-dimensionality of school products —represented mostly by textbooks or wall charts— to full three-dimensionality. It is certainly no coincidence that some exhibition classes dedicated to individual school

subjects also included specific subclasses devoted to the didactic objects used in teaching that particular discipline (*Esposizione generale italiana di Torino,* 1884, p. 29).

Through their participation, teachers also began to present a professional profile that appeared transformed: no longer only as authors of textbooks or of a single didactic invention, but also in a sense as "school artisans", with practical and manual skills that combined didactic and methodological knowledge with personal and hands-on experience. As will be seen in the next paragraph, for instance, they exhibited self-produced sample collections or gathered materials such as plants, woods, and small insects.

If didactic kits, natural specimens, and collections entered forcefully into the pedagogy of the 1880s, it is evident that these exhibitors demonstrated, on the one hand, how such approaches had already been grasped by the world of schooling, and on the other, how they were interpreted as products of excellence and innovation worthy of being presented at the exhibition to contribute to the emerging vision of education.

It is precisely this type of material that also led to the broadening of the range of museum institutions participating in the section dedicated to education: civic museums, zoological museums, and natural history museums increasingly came to see their collections as tools at the service of schools.

For the same reason, other firms whose core business was industrial production chose to diversify their target audiences by producing miniature versions of their own products to serve as teaching models. This was the case, for example, of the agricultural machinery manufacturer Sintoni & C. of Forlì, which undertook the production of a collection of didactic models of agricultural machines.

Associations, charitable organisations, and educational societies also began to expand their presence in the school-related sector of the exhibition, and —moving beyond the boundaries that had previously linked them more closely to the categories of welfare and charity— started to present themselves as producers of materials and collections, as shown by the case of the *Società Educativa Mafrruccino-Frantana,* which exhibited its own school museum.

With this 1884 National Exhibition, the presence of publishers such as Paravia and Vallardi was consolidated. These now appeared to claim a full dual productive identity: traditional publishers within the sections dedicated to printing and manuals, and at the same time genuine producers of what we might call three-dimensional "technical-educational materials", as will be discussed in the next paragraph.

2.3. What Is Exhibited of Schooling

Just as the perspective offered by the National Exhibition allows us to "read" the subjects involved in schooling and their evolution over time, it likewise offers a mirror of school-related production—or, in any case, of those materials that contemporaries considered capable of representing the school of their time.

In the first post-unification exhibition in Florence, schooling was represented mainly through geographical teaching aids such as maps and topographic plans. One aid designed to facilitate numerical calculation, particularly addition, appeared as "a walnut box with a brass wheel-operated machine" (*Commissione Reale,* 1861, p. 185). Other materials mostly concerned the world of books and included samples of bookbinding, types of paper, or actual manuals featuring calligraphy samples or reading and writing guides.

The scarcity of materials is not entirely surprising, given the date of 1861, which coincides with an embryonic phase in the development of the Italian school system. However, even at the subsequent exhibition ten years later, the materials on display still failed to convey a comprehensive image of schooling: the schools that exhibited —primarily vocational institutions— chose to present, in particular, student work

in the fields of sewing and embroidery. A school desk timidly appeared in the education section, but beyond that, most items were books presented by individual authors.

The role of publishers, however, seems to have begun to shift. In the 1871 exhibition, we find two publishers who, alongside textbooks, started to "expand" the notion of school materials: Antonio Vallardi presented "maps, engravings, books, etc., from his own establishment" (*Guida Ufficiale,* 1871, p. 55), while Paravia offered a "large exhibition of books, geographical maps, pictures, etc., for use by the youth" (*ibid.,* p. 56).

A greater variety in the types of materials considered educational and exhibited began to emerge with the 1881 National Exhibition in Milan. Alongside textbooks presented by many private individuals and drawing or manual work samples submitted by many schools, we also find school furnishings and didactic objects. Notably, Professor Vincenzo de Castro of Milan stood out for the range of inventions he presented, this time listed in detail, ranging from furnishings to specific didactic aids:

> 1.° Apparato meccanico Vittorino da Feltre per l'insegnamento della lettura, del calcolo e del disegno lineare.
>
> 2.° Modello d'un banco binato per gli Asili ed i Giardini d'Infanzia.
>
> 3.° Altro per le scuole elementari.
>
> 4.° Modello di una cattedra ad uso dei maestri elementari.
>
> 5.° Modello di una lavagna mobile.
>
> 6.° Piccola libreria, contenente opere pedagogiche e didattiche pubblicate dall'esponente, che potrà pure servire come modello di un museo pedagogico per le scuole elementari (Esposizione industriale italiana del 1881, 1883, p. 421).

Also present in the didactic section were educational tools aimed at facilitating learning for the blind, such as the globe used at the Institute for the Blind of Genoa, created by Professor Giovanni Bistolfi; a guiding machine designed to facilitate writing instruction for the blind, developed by Giuseppe Cardani of the Archimede Society of Milan; a raised relief map of Italy exhibited by the Institute for the Blind of Genoa; and a method for teaching music to the blind promoted by the Institute for the Blind of Padua. Among the exhibited objects were also collections self-produced by the schools themselves, including "a small museum for use in kindergartens" (*ibid.,* p. 77). A new and broader concept of "school objects" also emerges thanks to the items exhibited by museums participating as exhibitors, as demonstrated by the list of objects presented by the Civic Pedagogical Museum of Genoa:

> Banco di scuola ad un sol posto; Dujardin, banco di scuola Ravano; Banco ricavato da un modello del Museo Pedagogico di Roma e lievemente modificato; banco di scuola (Ricci) ad un sol posto; apparato per sostenere modelli di disegno e tavola per disegnare; piccola farmacia da campagna; paste alimentari; ortica tessile (collezione di cento prodotti), album di disegni di casamenti scolastici di Genova. (Ivi, pp. 422-3)

In the same way, municipalities also embraced this broader variety of school-related objects, as exemplified by the Municipality of Verona, which exhibited: "a school desk and chair, geographical maps, photographs, types of schools, and scientific materials for technical or vocational schools" (*ibid.,* p. 423). The various manufacturing companies entering the school supply market were the decisive factor marking a turning point in the conception of what constituted educational materials suitable for exhibition: from globes to models of geometric solids; from collections of specimens from the different kingdoms of nature or various branches of production to herbaria; from wall charts to didactic boxes; from taxidermied animals to skeletons and plaster models. The 1884 Exhibition witnessed a proliferation of exhibited objects specific

to individual school subjects: devices for teaching reading and writing, playing cards designed to initiate literacy, picture cards, movable alphabet boards—all multiplied to support the teaching of Italian. Likewise, numbers printed on blocks, educational games, counters, fraction tools, and much more were designed to support the learning of mathematics. The same expansion occurred in all other disciplines. For example, with regard to geography, the exhibition included mechanical calendars, planispheres, armillary spheres, three-dimensional geographic panels, relief maps, an economical teaching device for demonstrating movement, a waterproof topographic model, and projection apparatus for geographic instruction. Materials appeared for disciplines that had previously been absent. For instance, in the field of ethnographic education, busts representing "the five principal types of the human race" were exhibited. Both general and specialised collections multiplied: school museums, as well as collections of feathers, eggs, minerals, fossils, woods, and more. Similarly, miniature models expanded widely, ranging from anatomical models to those related to transport, communication, industry, and technological innovation—each scaled to dimensions appropriate for educational use (*Esposizione generale italiana,* 1884, pp. 51-112).

3. CONCLUSIONS

If, as Escolano Benito (2012) has shown, exhibitions can rightfully be considered a valid field of analysis for studying the material culture of schooling, then—alongside the major Universal Exhibitions, which offer a mirror of the general representation of schooling, the image that each country intends to promote concerning the development of its own education system, and the directions in which it wishes to "steer" its schools (del Pozo, 1983; Grosvenor, 2005; Lawn & Grosvenor, 2009; Dittrich, 2013)—certainly in the Italian case, the analytical perspective offered by the early National Exhibitions allows us to understand in depth the role attributed to schooling in a newly unified nation, while also revealing the reflections of its developments. Through the mirror provided by the presence of school materials on display at these national events, it becomes possible to read the "movements" within the world of education—understood both as political intent, as active agents, and as a reflection of school life itself. The proliferation of three-dimensional didactic objects supporting an ever-increasing number of disciplines, which began with the 1871 Exhibition and was definitively consolidated in the 1884 edition, allows us to grasp the didactic-methodological orientations that were gaining ground in Italy during those years, as well as the role of teachers in affirming these orientations. It also reveals the emergence of new disciplines (such as school hygiene, ethnography...) and of aspects of school life that, depending on the historical moment in which the Exhibition took place, were selected for display: from student practical work in the early editions, to the development of school buildings in the later ones; from the predominant role of textbooks to the centrality of collections of materials and miniature models. At multiple levels, we witness a phenomenon that we may summarise with the term "expansion": expansion of the exhibiting actors; expansion in the types of materials on display; and expansion in the types of students and educational levels represented in the exhibitions (Morandini, 2021). The image returned by the analysis of the National Exhibitions is that of a country in which, although schooling had been formally assigned a fundamental role at the legislative level, it was not yet fully clear —even to itself— what that role was, what its needs were, and what its future development might be. Only at a later stage did a plurality of actors come into play to contribute to the key role of schooling as a driver of innovation and development for the new unified nation—a role that had previously only been assigned to it formally, but which it would later begin to genuinely take on. Starting with the 1881 Exhibition, one can discern through the displays the emergence of a real set of forces and actors actively engaged in developing the role of schooling in Italy. A decisive role in this process seems to have been played by manufacturing companies, which on the one hand understood the developmental directions and adapted accordingly, and on the other hand influenced those directions through their

products. If the role of publishers in this regard is no longer surprising —as they increasingly expanded their presence in the school sector by diversifying their offerings beyond initial textbooks (Targhetta, 2006; Brunelli & Targhetta, 2024)— more notable is the arrival within the educational field of technical, scientific, agricultural, industrial, and engineering firms, which —certainly for educational purposes, but likely also in recognition of the existence of a promising sales market— began producing "school versions" of their products. If, according to contemporary observers (such as Sacchetti, in his report on the prizes awarded by the Jury at the 1881 Exhibition, or Vincenzo, in his monograph dedicated to schooling on display at the 1884 National Exhibition, published the following year), the "school things" showcased at the early Italian National Exhibitions did not, in reality, succeed in advancing educational innovation, they certainly contributed to offering the broader public a new vision of a unified Italy in which schooling held—or aspired to hold—a specific role in the making of Italians.

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