

# The Post-war Reconstruction of Nemi Ships Museum: Pushing the Boundaries between Museography and Memorialisation

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*Nemi Ships Museum, Museum's reconstruction, Luigi Tursini, Guido Ucelli, Museography.*

## /Abstract

The Nemi Ships Museum is an early and unique example of museum architecture for large archaeological objects, built to display two great ancient Roman ships extracted from Lake Nemi near Rome between 1928 and 1932. The history of the Museum is a significant case study depicting development of fascist propaganda through heritage politics, archaeology, museography, and construction. During WWII, the Museum was damaged by a devastating fire that destroyed the ships. After the war ended, it was renovated, hosting a new exhibition, which opened in 1953. The new intervention had to deal with the huge cultural loss with a combined strategy of in-scale reconstruction of the ships and the original setting, by displaying the surviving finds, revisiting the huge fascist endeavour, and memorialising destruction. Nemi Ships Museum new setting can be contextualised within the general process of museum reconstruction in post-war Italy.

This paper uses documents and archival sources to reconstruct the key moments of the chronological and contextual development of the museum, contextualising them in the historical frames surrounding the story of Nemi Ships Museum and its post-war reconstruction. The claim is that this architecture represents both an early example of the renovation of museography in Italy following the 1934 Madrid Conference, and of a combined museal and memorial setting during Post-War Reconstruction.

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## 1944: a burning museum

On the 10th of June 1945 architect Furio Fasolo (1915-1987) was sent to assess the damage of Nemi's Museum of the Roman Ships<sup>1</sup>. In one of its direst moments in history, Italy was invaded by two armies: the Germans were slowly retreating north, while the Allies were advancing from the south. Most of Central Italy was turned into a battlefield, and Italian cities were heavily bombed by Anglo-American forces. The hilly countryside around Nemi was the last natural obstacle before Rome, and its lake was on the line of fire in the last days of May 1944. In the night between May 31 and June 1, while German troops were still occupying the northern shore, a fire broke in the museum, which hosted two of the largest Roman ships ever discovered, about 70x30 m each. They had been extracted from the bottom of the lake between 1928 and 1934 and were among the most important archaeological findings of the century. Fasolo's report is daunting: the fire burned all wooden elements of the hulls, melted the covering lead sheets – only copper nails and other small elements were spared (**Fig. 1**). The building was heavily damaged as well, with the interior plaster and windows completely fragmented, and 3-meter artillery shell holes on the roof<sup>2</sup>. The commission investigating the fire held retreating German troops responsible, but recent findings indicate that the most probable cause were fragments of artillery shells shot by US counterbattery, aimed against German anti-aircraft cannons located a few hundred meters from the museum<sup>3</sup>. The museum had been lavishly inaugurated by Mussolini in 1940: it lasted less than four years. With the end of the war, it was time to decide what to do with the ruins.

## Developing and Exhibition from the Excavation to the Museum

Before discussing the postwar reconstruction of the museum, it is necessary to briefly summarise its history<sup>4</sup>.

The Nemi lake area was well settled by the Romans since the Archaic era. A special branch of Via Appia led to its northern shore, where there was an ancient sanctuary dedicated to the goddess Diana. The importance of the place is remarked by large imperial villas and noble residences found in the surroundings. The landscape of Nemi was deemed sacred since the Bronze Age, as demonstrated by archaeological evidence, and the cult of Diana was associated

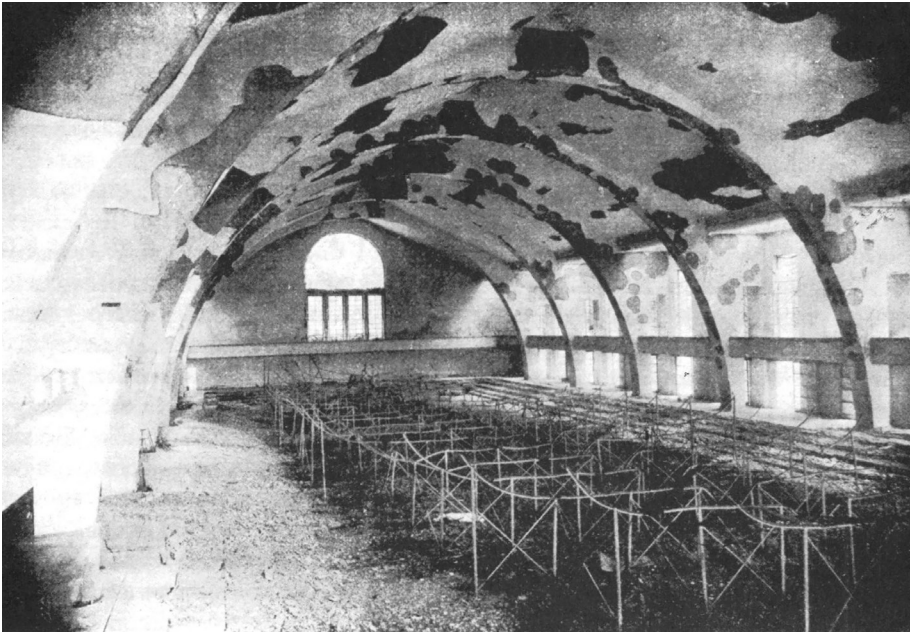
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1 See Stefano Gizzi, "Tra università e istituzioni di tutela: Vittorio Ballio Morpurgo, Furio Fasolo e Bruno Maria Apollonjo Ghetti", in *La Facoltà di Architettura dell'Università di Roma "La Sapienza" dalle origini al Duemila. Discipline, docenti, studenti*, ed. Franchetti Pardo (Roma: Gangemi, 2001), 411-452.

2 Fasolo, *Notizie relative al grafico dimostrativo delle lesioni verificatesi alle coperture del Museo delle navi di Nemi*, 13 June 1944, Archivio della Soprintendenza Archeologica per il Lazio (SAL), Nemi XI, A. Dep 11/001, published in Gizzi, "Tra università...", 2001, 420.

3 A recent detailed inquiry on Nemi's fire was carried out by historians Altamura and Paolucci: Flavio Altamura and Stefano Paolucci, *L'incendio delle navi di Nemi. Indagine su un cold case della Seconda guerra mondiale* (Grottaferrata: Passamonti, 2023), 230-240.

4 Most of the basic historical information of this section comes from the following sources: Guido Ucelli, *Le navi di Nemi* (Roma: Poligrafia della Zecca di Stato, 1940); Giuseppina Ghini and Stefano Gizzi, *Il lago di Nemi e il suo Museo* (Roma: Soprintendenza Archeologica per il Lazio, 1996); Giacomo Calandra di Roccolino, "Architettura e propaganda. Il Museo delle Navi di Nemi, spunti per una ricerca", *La Rivista di Engramma*, no. 203 (2023): 23-33.



to the Sacred Forest that surrounded the temple. The existence of ancient ships inside the lake was well known since at least the XV century, with famous failed extraction attempts by Leon Battista Alberti (circa 1446) and later Francesco De Marchi (1535). No ancient source mentions the ships, hence these first explorers were the first to hypothesise that they might be a kind of floating palace, as were too large for the small lake. During the XVIII century, and especially the second half of the XIX century, thanks to the availability of underwater equipment, both ships were explored under the direction of Annesio Fusconi (1827) and Eliseo Borghi (1895), who first documented the finds, including bronze statues and mosaic panels. These campaigns, however, were focused on extracting valuable artefacts and damaged historical data: in 1896 the Ministry of Education ended the spoliation of the ships, and between 1895 and 1896 Vittorio Malfatti published the first modern scientific studies on this subject. Plans for further exploration and extraction of the ships were devised in the following years but were not put in action due to the operation's complexity and cost. The lake history gained international attention especially after the publication of the *Golden Bough* by anthropologist James Frazer, who, inspired by the sacrifice rituals of the *Rex nemorensis* associated to the sanctuary, developed his well-known comparative approach on magic and religion.

In 1923 the rise of fascism in Italy made conditions favourable again. Party propaganda being based on "romanity"<sup>5</sup> meant the financing of great archaeological projects, such as the Ara Pacis reconstruction or the Roman Forums excavations. Senator Corrado Ricci (1858-1934), interested in the ships since 1907, proposed then the extraction project from lake Nemi that was enthusiastically

5 On the topic of fascist propaganda of "romanity" through archaeology, see: Luciano Canfora, "Classicismo e fascismo", *Quaderni di Storia*, no. 3 (1976): 15-48; Joshua Arthurs, *Excavating Modernity. The Roman Past in Fascist Italy* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2012); Emilio Gentile, *Il fascismo di pietra* (Bari: Laterza, 2007); Daniele Manacorda, "Per un'indagine sull'archeologia italiana durante il ventennio fascista", *Archeologia Medievale*, no. 9, (1982): 443-470; Alessandra Muntori, "Architetti e archeologi a Roma", in *Storia dell'architettura Italiana. Il primo Novecento*, edited by Giorgio Ciucci and Giorgio Muratore (Milano: Electa, 2004).

Fig. 1  
Interior of the eastern hall of Nemi Ships Museum destroyed by the fire. Published in Ucellini, *Le Navi di Nemi*, 1950, 308.

endorsed by Mussolini in 1926. In terms of propaganda, the large Roman ships were to be the testimony of the greatness and technological development of the Italian Navy.

It was to become one of the greatest archaeological venues of Italian history. The process of extraction of the enormous ships from the bottom of the lake was in itself an operation displaying the regime's best engineering capabilities. Among various solutions, it was decided to empty the lake with large pumps. This choice was not only technical but was tied with the regime's transformations campaigns of portions of the Italian territory by draining insalubrious wetlands to expand agricultural land.

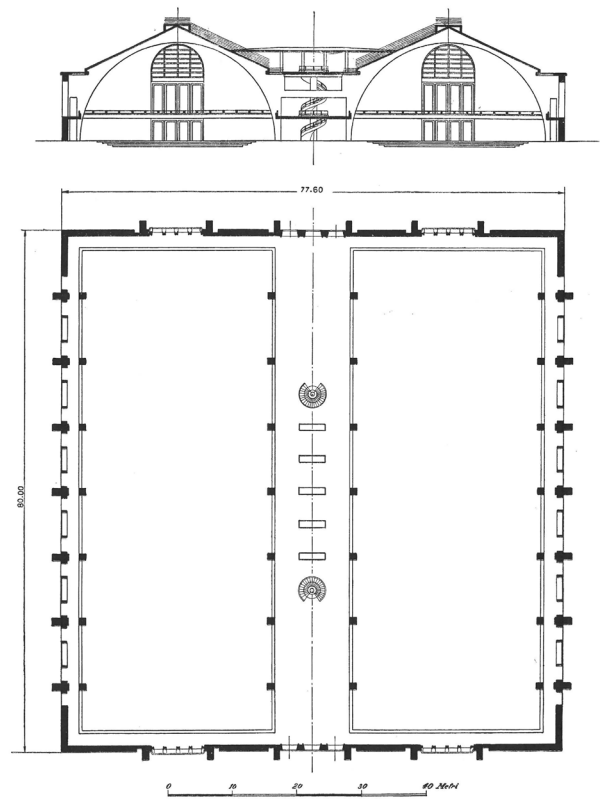
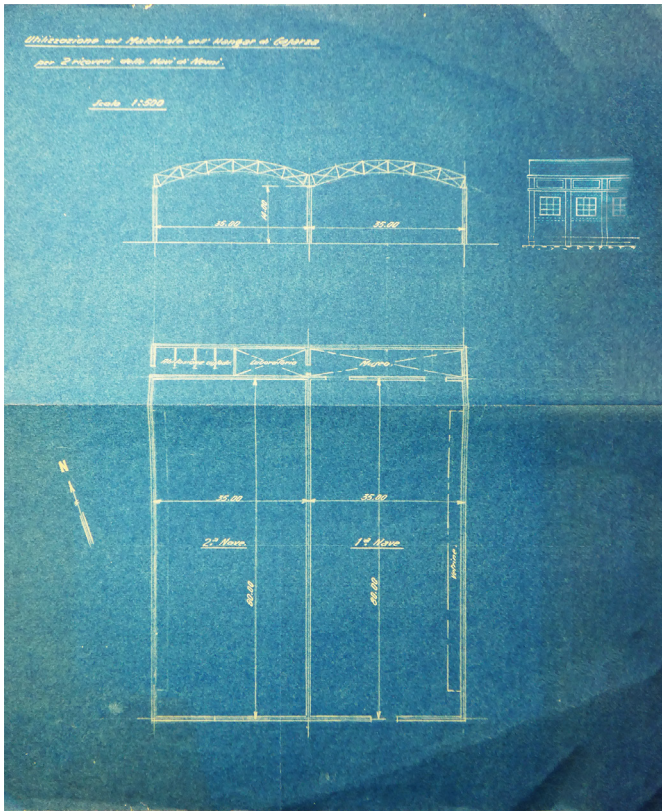
The enterprise was organised by the regime as an exemplar fascist collaboration between institutions and the private sector, involving Ministries, such as Education, Navy, and Airforce, which sponsored the project, public companies, such as the Electrical Company of Latium, providing resources, and private companies that carried out the works and provided machinery. Some of the best archaeology and engineering specialists were invited to participate and share their expertise – among them Guido Ucelli (1885-1964), engineer, brilliant CEO of Riva Calzoni and archaeology enthusiast. Riva Calzoni was at the time one of the largest heavy machinery companies in Italy and produced hydraulic turbines and pumps. Ucelli not only provided the pumps but played a crucial role in the success of the whole operation by coordinating technical works. His volume on the Nemi ships, published in two editions before and after the war<sup>6</sup>, stands now as the most complete description of the ships, with a detailed history of the operation, and scholarly essays on the finds: the archaeological site, the objects, and the hulls were represented through measured drawings, which became the most important source for their reconstruction after the fire.

As soon as the ships started to emerge and the digging began, it became evident that the ships should be displayed near the shores, as it was impossible to move them much farther. The first projects focused more on sheltering the ships, and the musealisation function was of less importance – they were similar to archaeological coverings. An initial provisional structure of steel trusses and canvas was built to protect the first ship for two years while the second ship was still under excavation. At the same time, the site had a little exhibition room for smaller finds retrieved from the mud: nails, bronze heads, anchors, terracotta elements, gilded bronze tiles, mosaic fragments, coins, wooden doors, pumps, lead pipes. Some of these were unique objects that significantly contributed to the history of Roman naval engineering.

This provisional room reflected a traditional archaeological musealisation scheme where the finds – displayed and arranged according to typological/chronological classification in a separate building – were protected from the excavation site. The provisional museum was open for visitors (including

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6 Ucelli, *Le Navi di Nemi*.



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celebrities and high officials), and many were coming to see the work in progress – for them were laid the first visiting paths that encircled the ships. All these elements later became the basis for the final exhibition<sup>7</sup>.

The first projects for the final recovery of the ships reflect their provisional setting: they are based on the reuse of zeppelin hangar coverings that had the necessary span and were readily available due to the decommissioning of airships from military aviation. Steel trusses on pillars would create two parallel halls for the ships, and behind, in a separate space, there would be the exhibition halls for the objects (Fig. 2). There are more than three variants of this layout, dating from 1929 to 1933, the last designed by Italo Gismondi (1927-1974)<sup>8</sup>. For reasons still unclear, none of these proposals was accepted, and in 1933 a previously discarded proposal by Vittorio Morpurgo (1890-1966) became the project of the museum still visible today (Fig. 3)<sup>9</sup>.

This project was completely different both in construction and museography principles: the structure consisted in large span reinforced concrete arches connected by massive beams supporting a gable roof; from the point of view of spatial organisation, Morpurgo's project is much more fluid in the connection

Fig. 2  
General plan of the Museum, draft by Ucelli's technical office, reusing hangar trusses (INASA, Fondo Navi di Nemi, C. 2, b. 3, doc 01).

Fig. 3  
Approved plan of the Museum, designed by Vittorio Morpurgo (published in Ucelli, *Le Navi di Nemi*, 1950, 106).

7 For a more detailed description of the genesis of the Museum's project during the excavation of the ships, see my article: Christian Toson, "Dallo scavo all'architettura. Ingegneri, archeologi e architetti nella genesi del progetto del Museo delle Navi di Nemi", *Ricerche di Storia dell'Arte*, vol. 142 (2024): 59-67.

8 Ghini and Gizzi, *Il lago di Nemi e il suo Museo*, 30.

9 Istituzione Biblioteca Classense (IBC), Carte Corrado Ricci, Corrispondenza Navi di Nemi, b. 2, f. 223, f. 250.



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between different areas. Between the two halls there is a central gallery, functioning both as the main distribution axis, hosting the main entrance, staircases, and service rooms, and as an exhibition area for smaller objects. Furthermore, a mezzanine level allowed to walk around the ships, and to exhibit other artefacts. In this setting the visitor could enjoy a dynamic view of the archaeological finds, viewing the ships from below, and above, and could climb the helicoidal steps to the rooftop terraces for a panoramic view of the lake. Large windows on all four sides create connections both with the water and the nearby ancient sanctuary. Special architectural details reinforced the relationship between the building and the ships, such as the balustrade of the mezzanine, or the asbestos roof tiles, custom-made in the same shape as the gilded bronze ones found on the ships. Overall, Morpurgo's project deals with the complexity of the relationship between interior and exterior, between the exhibited object and ancient sacred landscape (Fig. 4).

This was probably one of the first modern museums in Italy conceived to display only one archaeological find, in one single articulated space. It may be possible that ideas coming from the Madrid Conference on Museography (1934), a turning point in the design of museums<sup>10</sup> were applied in the Nemi display, since

<sup>10</sup> Italian speakers at the conference were Ugo Ojetti, Roberto Paribeni, Amedeo Maiuri, see Mulazzani, Marco. "Il museo italiano: la trasformazione di spazi storici in spazi espositivi: attualità dell'esperienza museografica degli anni '50", in *Il Museo italiano*, ed. Antonella Huber (Milano: Lybra, 1997), 59, citing *Museographie, Architecture, et Aménagement des Musées d'Art*, Madrid 1935. See also Jean-Baptiste Jarmin, "La Conférence de Madrid (1934). Histoire d'une manifestation internationale à l'origine de la muséographie moderne", *Il Capitale Culturale. Studies on the Value of Cultural Heritage*, no. 15 (2017): 73-101.

Fig. 4  
Pictures of the museum in 1940. View from below, from the gallery, and from above (SAL 3254 no. 4485-88).

one of the Italian representatives at the Conference, Roberto Paribeni (1876-1956), was deeply involved in the Nemi operation. Afterwards, new principles of museography became popular in Europe, focusing on the importance of visitor experience. Visual sequence, articulation of the movement, the importance of light, both natural and artificial – are some of the keywords of these new trends apparently followed in the Museum in Nemi. Moreover, in the same years, in Italy important museum renovation projects were carried out, such as the resetting of the Roman National Museum, which hosted some of the findings from Nemi. Other relevant events of that time were the great exhibitions, such as the “Mostra Augustea della Romanità”, started in 1934 and opened in 1937, linked with most of the fascist archaeological ventures, and the “Prima Mostra Triennale delle Terre Italiane d’Oltremare” in Naples, opened in 1940, where significant effort was put to celebrate the Italian Navy, in particular with the pavilion of the Repubbliche Marinare. Within the exhibition, the large reconstruction of Admiral Marco Querini’s XVI century *galea* bears resemblance with the setting of the Nemi ships.<sup>11</sup> While the Museum was certainly built during a period of great experimentation in museography, the available documents do not allow to completely understand the design choices. Morpurgo’s archive is currently inaccessible<sup>12</sup>.

Building started in 1934, carried out by the Genio Civile under the direction of Antonio Buongiorno, who developed the concrete structures with his team. Once the roof was finished, the giant ships were spectacularly transferred from the bottom of the lake to their final position inside the halls on the shore some 200 meters away, using rails and hundreds of winches. In 1936 the front façade was closed, and interior works started. New, specially designed, metal supports replaced rough wooden cradles. Thin metal frames over the hulls supported the bronze bow and outlined the possible shape of the upper part of the vessels. The supports held also bronze head copies and details of the ships in their original position. Specially designed showcases in the central gallery hosted the heads, the balustrades, and other smaller objects. Larger objects, such as the anchors and marble columns, were kept at the lower level.

On the 25<sup>th</sup> of April 1940, after fourteen years of work, the museum was finally inaugurated by Mussolini with a lavish celebration. Six weeks later, Italy would enter World War II.

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11 See the pictures of the Prima Mostra Triennale delle Terre Italiane d’Oltremare - padiglione delle Repubbliche Marinare by Federico Patellani, in SIRBeC, Sistema Informativo Regionale dei Beni Culturali Lombardia <https://www.lombardiabeniculturali.it/fotografie/schede/IMM-3g010-0010444/>. See also Gabriella Prisco, “Allestimenti museali, mostre e aura dei materiali tra le due guerre nel pensiero di Amedeo Maiuri”, *Il Capitale Culturale. Studies on the Value of Cultural Heritage*, no. 14 (2016): 531-574.

12 Vittorio Morpurgo’s documents are held in the private archive of Piergiorgio Santoro, currently unaccessible. The last publication citing the archive is Stefano Gizzi, “Tra università e istituzioni di tutela: Vittorio Ballio Morpurgo, Furio Fasolo e Bruno Maria Apollonjo Ghetti”, in *La Facoltà di Architettura dell’Università di Roma “La Sapienza” dalle origini al Duemila. Discipline, docenti, studenti*, ed. Franchetti Pardo (Roma: Gangemi, 2001), 411-452.



### The destruction and reconstruction of the Museum

From September 1943 to June 1944 the surroundings of Rome faced heavy destruction caused by the Allied advance. The Albani hills area, where Nemi lies, was repeatedly bombed<sup>13</sup>. Most of the damage was caused to the city of Frascati and the villages of Genzano, Albano Laziale, Velletri, Grottaferrata; cultural monuments were destroyed, and many residents displaced.

On the 24<sup>th</sup> of July 1943 German troops occupied the Museum. Fearing direct or indirect damages, Superintendent Salvatore Aurigemma (1885-1964) transferred the most valuable pieces, such as the bronzes, to Palazzo Massimo in Rome<sup>14</sup>. On the 10<sup>th</sup> of November 1943 the museum was officially listed by the Abteilung Kunstschutz, the Military office for the protection of monuments<sup>15</sup>, so as to be protected by the German military. In February and April 1944, following the Anzio landings, the areas surrounding Nemi and Genzano area were bombed heavily. Hundreds of displaced villagers sought refuge in Museum, believing it would be spared from the attacks. People camped among the ships, lighting fires, cooking, hanging laundry, bringing chairs and beds, creating a serious threat to the conservation of the delicate archaeological material (Fig. 5). Aurigemma, with the collaboration of German military, evacuated the people the 3<sup>rd</sup> of April<sup>16</sup>. In the following months the museum wasn't accessible, guarded

13 For a detailed account see Raimondo Del Nero, *L'8 settembre 1943 a Frascati. Sessanta anni dopo* (Roma: Aracne, 2003).

14 The chronology of the war years of the Museum was reconstructed by Altamura and Paolucci in *L'incendio delle navi di Nemi. Indagine su un cold case della Seconda guerra mondiale*, 2023, chapter V, *il museo fra due fuochi*, 109-150.

15 On the activity of the Kunstschutz, see Klinkhammer, Lutz. "Arte in guerra: tutela e distruzione delle opere d'arte italiane durante l'occupazione tedesca: 1943-1945", in *Parola d'ordine Teodora*, ed. Giuseppe Masetti and Antonio Panaino (Ravenna: Longo Angelo, 2005).

16 Ucelli, *Le navi di Nemi*, 321.

Fig. 5  
Genzano and Nemi residents sheltered among the Nemi ships (SAL scheda 2171 inv. no. 2815).





by local keepers and German soldiers, while fighting in the area intensified. Between 22:00 and 24:00 on May 31<sup>st</sup>, following American artillery strikes aimed at a nearby battery, the Museum burned down. The building was hit also on June 1<sup>st</sup> and June 2<sup>nd</sup> by the advancing army. Germans retreated from Nemi in the night of June 2<sup>nd</sup>, and only in the morning of June 3<sup>rd</sup> the keepers could assess the damage. Except for the concrete structures, everything had been destroyed by the high temperatures of the fire. American troops occupied the shores of the lake on June 4<sup>th</sup>.

The first alterations to the museum after the fire were made by American soldiers. Photographs taken by them<sup>17</sup> as well as envoys from the Italian Superintendence<sup>18</sup> show the building being used as a shelter for the troops<sup>19</sup> (Fig. 6). The central section of the museum, with lower ceilings and two floors, was cleared from the debris, as were the perimetral walkways. The remains were shovelled in the centre of the halls, mixing archaeological and modern material together. On the free spots were placed army cots with mosquito nets and some camping equipment. It is unclear how long the Allied troops camped in the building, but we know that on June 7<sup>th</sup> news arrived to Aurigemma and on June 8<sup>th</sup> the first official visits by the MFAA (Monuments, Fine Arts and Archives Sub commission: the so-called "Monuments Men" took place), followed by inspections carried by the Superintendence from 10<sup>th</sup> to 15<sup>th</sup> June; at this time architect Furio Fasolo wrote his report<sup>20</sup>. Nemi's Museum wasn't an exceptional case: in those months Italian heritage authorities in Latium were dealing with

17 Imperial War Museum, NA 16168-73.

18 Historical Archive of Soprintendenza Archeologica di Roma (SAL), fondo Salvatore Aurigemma, Nemi, scheda 3712, inv. 5244; scheda 2172, inv. 2816; scheda 2173 inv. 2817; scheda 2171 inv. 2815.

19 See also Altamura and Paolucci, *L'incendio delle navi di Nemi*, 184-190.

20 See footnote 2.

Fig.6  
American camp in the burned  
museum (SAL scheda 2173  
inv. 2817).



massive destruction of historical and archaeological sites<sup>21</sup>; Fasolo himself was busy with the repair of damages in Villa Adriana, Tivoli, and the Sanctuary of Palestrina<sup>22</sup>.

Apparently, Nemi's Museum didn't receive any serious attention until 1948, when the same institutions that built it, i.e. the Ministry of Education, the Ministry of Public Works, and the Ministry of Naval Defence, decided to start the reconstruction. A letter dated December 4, 1949, states that Luigi Tursini was in charge of the interior exhibition, especially regarding the construction of "models and simulacres" that reproduced with "maximum correspondence" the lost ships<sup>23</sup>. Tursini was a naval engineer and had been involved in the study of the Roman ships: his calculations on their possible hydrostatic characteristics were published in Ucelli's volume<sup>24</sup>. He had a deep knowledge of the ships' geometries and was probably the best qualified person for their possible reconstruction, but he lacked museology experience. Current sources don't indicate the architect coordinating restoration works on the building, nor they provide construction drawings, except for a general plan<sup>25</sup>.

21 For an overview on the degree of destruction of central Italian heritage in those years, see the reports by: Emilio Lavagnino, *Cinquanta monumenti italiani danneggiati dalla guerra*. Roma, 1947; Guglielmo De Angelis d'Ossat, "Danni di guerra e restauro dei monumenti", *Atti del V Convegno Nazionale di Storia dell'Architettura*. Perugia, 1948; and *La ricostruzione del patrimonio artistico italiano* (Roma: La Libreria dello Stato, 1950).

22 For a reconstruction of Fasolo's reconstruction of Villa Adriana and Palestrina, see Stefano Gizzi, "Tra università e istituzioni di tutela: Vittorio Ballio Morpurgo, Furio Fasolo e Bruno Maria Apollonio Ghetti", in *La Facoltà di Architettura dell'Università di Roma "La Sapienza" dalle origini al Duemila. Discipline, docenti, studenti*, ed. Franchetti Pardo (Roma: Gangemi, 2001), 411-452; and Maria Bergamo, "Bombe sulle rovine: Villa Adriana 1943-1944", in *Strategie della memoria: architettura e paesaggi di guerra*, ed. Maria Bergamo and Andrea Iorio (Roma: Aracne, 2014), 54-63.

23 The letter is a photocopy kept in the Nemi Museum director's office. The position of the original is in the Archive of Soprintendenza (SAL). Title: *Ricostruzione del Museo Navale di Roma in Nemi*, from: Ministero della Difesa Marina, Direzione generale delle Costruzioni Navali e Meccaniche, signed by General Inspector dr. ing. Ignazio Alfano to: Ten. Col. GN. Luigi Tursini, and c.c. Ministero Pubblica Istruzione, Ministero dei Lavori Pubblici, Guido Ucelli, Maricost.

24 Ucelli, *Le Navi di Nemi*, 369-393.

25 Attachment to the letter mentioned in footnote 23.

Fig. 7  
The westward hall after restoration, with the model ships on the right and the metal profile on the left. (Nemi Ships Museum archive).

Despite scarcity of official documents, there is a consistent photographic documentation that allows us to reconstruct the works in detail<sup>26</sup> (Fig. 7).

The main problem in the restoration was the absence of the two ships, a gap that couldn't be easily filled, given that the museum was purposely built to host them. The decision taken in 1949 was to completely restore one of the two pavilions and the central gallery, while the interior of the other pavilion would have had repaired only the roof, the windows, and exterior walls, leaving the interior as it was after the fire<sup>27</sup>.

### Re-enacting the original exhibition

Construction site photos show how the westward hall was completely repaired: plasters, wall coverings, and floors were stripped out and replaced, the original mosaic surfaces of the stairs and some parts of the mezzanine substituted with simple coloured plaster; balustrades were remade. The floor was the most modified part: the original levels of the stepped floor were covered by a single flat surface, a few centimetres lower than the central section, seemingly with a polished concrete finish.

The exhibition designed by Tursini occupied this space with two main areas: on the right, along the central section, two 1:5 models of the original hulls; on the left, a 1:1 reconstruction of half of the outline of one ship (Fig. 8). The remaining space was left for the main bronzes, while pictures, drawings, and smaller material, such as tiles and pipes, were placed along the perimetral wall.

The model ships were placed in a pit created in the floor, at the level of the Roman road that leads to Nemi's sanctuary, crossing the museum. In the original setting the road was exposed in a deep trench in the floor, but it wasn't accessible. Conversely, the new pit is accessible by a spacious staircase. The pit floor was clad with broken tiles (the so-called Palladian floor), resembling ancient road paving; the pit sides were painted plain black. The models were placed on tall stilts, so that they could stay at the ground floor level. This allowed the viewer to observe the models from the top, from the side and from below.

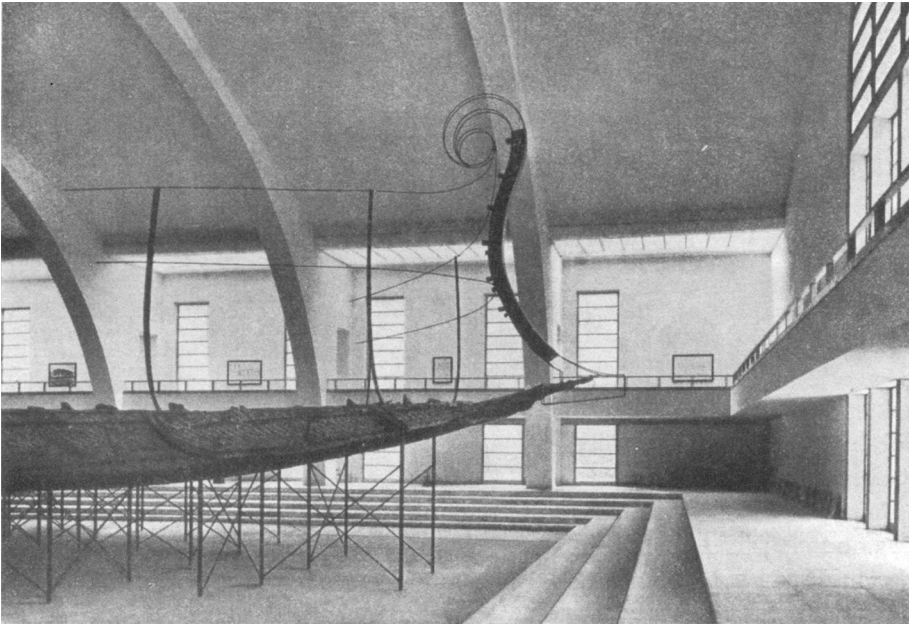


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26 Archived pictures of the Soprintendenza Archeologica del Lazio (SAL), scheda 3003, inv. 4005-4043.

27 From Ucelli, *Le Navi di Nemi*, 326, written before the end of the restoration: "Le riparazioni da eseguirsi dal Ministero dei Lavori Pubblici, Provveditorato Regionale alle Opere Pubbliche per il Lazio, comprenderanno la reintegrazione totale di uno dei due padiglioni e della galleria centrale, mentre nell'altro padiglione si ha in programma di eseguire solo le riparazioni protettive del tetto, degli intonaci esterni e degli infissi, lasciando l'interno come è stato ridotto dall'incendio."

Fig. 8  
Installation of metal tubing tracing the line of a ship, designed by Tursini (Nemi Ships Museum archive).



On the outer side, a tall construction in white metal tubes spans the entire length of the hall. It reproduces, in real-size, half of the outline of one of the Roman ships. One long pipe follows a curved shape corresponding to the bow, the hypothetical washboard line, and ends on the high stern. Other shorter pipes, placed perpendicularly, represent the outriggers. The pipes are held at the right position by thick round posts of the same colour.

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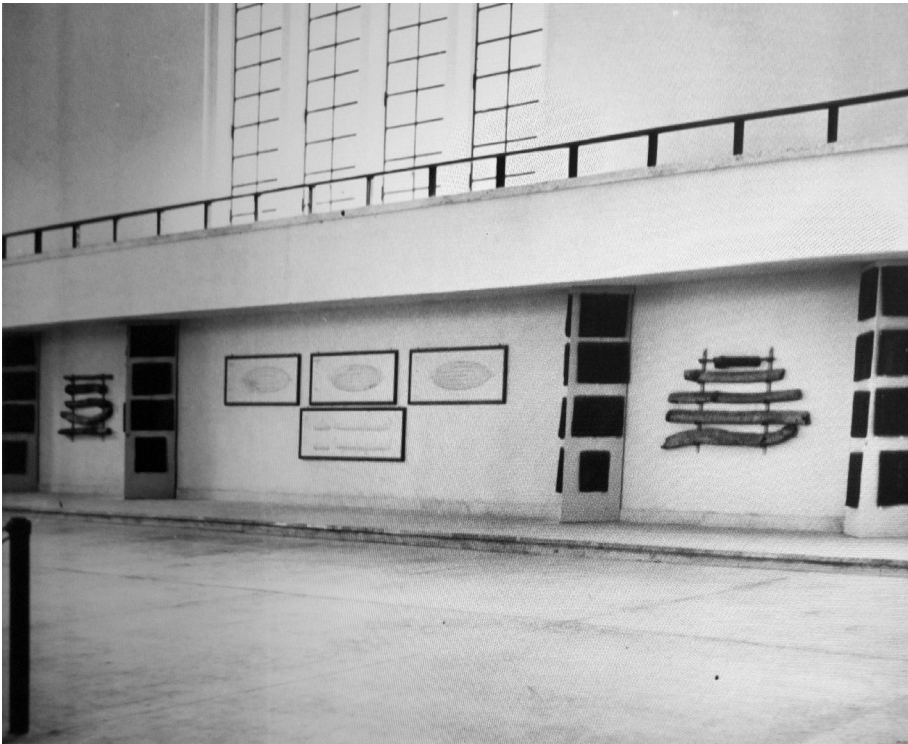
In the first setting, the original bronzes were placed in special window cases in the upper central gallery, and copies were mounted on the ships' outriggers to show their appearance in the correct location. They were retrieved from Rome for the new setting and placed on the ground floor without casing. The decorated balustrade stands right in front of the model hulls, while the heads are arranged in a composition of four crossed beam supports, analogous to the ones used in the provisional exhibition during the excavation (Fig. 10).

In the lower central gallery, there are window cases for smaller objects, similar to the original ones, while in the middle, copies of the large anchors (Fig. 11).

This setting deals with absence with a descriptive-didactic strategy. The lost ships are rendered with a triple description: 1) scaled copies, for a detailed image; 2) a 1:1 abstract line, to imagine the real scale; 3) technical drawings of the archaeological findings, giving a philological description; those are the

Fig. 9  
Original metal rods on the hull designed by Morpurgo suggesting the shape of the ship (published in Ucelli, *Le Navi di Nemi*, 1950, 107).

Fig. 10  
Settings of the bronze heads, from the first provisional museum (1930-35, left), to their place on the aft of the ship (1940-44, centre), to the 1953 exhibition (1953-1962, right) (SAL scheda 2564, inv. 3330, 4136).



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source of the other two representations. Perception of the original object is reconstructed by deconstruction, by the separation of the once all-encompassing experience in three smaller events that help grasp the lost ships' grandness.

The model hulls were built in the docks of Castellammare di Stabia, a few kilometres from Nemi, under the supervision of Tursini. Even scaled, they were considerably large, around 13 meters long: their transport and placement in the museum required large lorries. There are two newsreel footages<sup>28</sup> documenting the transfer. In a festive atmosphere, the lorries, escorted by the police, travel from Castellammare to Nemi. Their journey is a pretext to depict the reconstruction efforts in Italy: a village bearing evident traces of the bombings, farmers

Fig. 11

Display of the smaller artifacts. Morpurgo's window cases (1940-1944, left), 1953 exhibition, with the model ship in the background (1953-1962, centre) (SAL scheda 3003, inv. 4015, 4634).

Fig. 12

Display of the lead pipes, bronze tiles, and reconstruction drawings on the walls in the 1953 setting (SAL scheda 2566, inv. 4638).

28 Newsreels *Ricostruita la seconda nave di Nemi*, 01/05/1952, code I076705, (<https://patrimonio.archivioluice.com/luce-web/detail/IL5000020850/2/-10423.html>, last accessed November 2024) and *Trasporto di navi al museo di Nemi*, 08/05/1952, code ML002502, (<https://patrimonio.archivioluice.com/luce-web/detail/IL5000040025/2/trasporto-navi-al-museo-nemi.html>, last accessed November 2024).



on the road, a destroyed bridge with a new one rebuilt on the side, the Nemi landscape from the distance, a close up on Roman capitals, and finally the Museum, still scarred by the war, covered with scaffoldings. The model is slowly pushed inside through a hole in the main façade. The parallel with the regime footages of the Roman ships transferred inside is evident<sup>29</sup>, but the setting and the atmosphere are completely different (**Fig. 13**). Mightiness and sublimity are scaled down, replaced with dynamicity and industriousness, and an underlying humble melancholy, well reflecting post-war Italy.

It may not be excessive to consider this event a particular form of re-enactment. Not only the process of transporting the ships inside the museum is done on similar premises, but the setting itself bears references to the old one. Even in the new setting, the ships can be visited from above and below, and it is possible to walk around them, albeit at different levels. The central gallery and the perimeter walls, unchanged, retain the same function. The 1:1 profile has analogous function to Morpurgo's metal rods suggesting the missing parts of the hulls. Even the bronzes, no longer on the mezzanine, are placed so as to reproduce some of the previous effects. The heads are also arranged in a square, as in the very first setting, and alluding to their arrangement on the ancient ships. The balustrade remains in front of the window, looking out on the lake.

The new setting is not overbearing or experimental, but rather plain and subdued, in deference to the original one. Everything seems to be arranged to allow a rational reconstruction of "how it was": behind the modest, didactic approach, probably also lies a memorial intention.

## A memorial?

The memorial function of the museum may be confirmed by the hall whose interiors were probably left in their ruined state on purpose<sup>30</sup>, while roof and windows were repaired to provide weather protection. From the available sources it

29 See, as an example the Luce newsreel *Sul lago di Nemi si assiste all'alaggio delle due navi di Caligola per il ricovero nel nuovo museo*, 01/04/1936, code B086106 (<https://patrimonio.archivioluca.com/luce-web/detail/IL5000022332/2/sul-lago-nemi-si-assiste-all'alaggio-due-navi-caligola-ricovero-nel-nuovo-museo.html> last accessed November 2024).

30 See footnote 27.

Fig. 13

Transport of the first ship in the Museum (1935), and trasport of Tursini's 1:5 model reconstructions in the 1953 exhibition (1953-1962) (Nemi Ships Museum archive).



is not possible to state with certainty whether the ruined hall was an intentional memorial setting, or simply something to be completed in the future. While a document dated 1948 shows some partitions separating it from renewed part, which may suggest the second hypothesis<sup>31</sup>, it seems quite peculiar for the windows to have been replaced without first removing the debris, as it happened with the other hall. In addition, from 1953 to 1963 the ruins were kept untouched in their position and not removed: this may suggest that, at least in time, they became accepted as part of the museum setting.

This is furtherly reinforced by the depiction of the Museum by director Elio Petri in the 1961 movie *L'assassino*<sup>32</sup>. In the scene starting at 27'41", the main characters of the film enter the Nemi Ships Museum. Starting from the eastern hall, they walk on the burned rubble, passing between the deformed metal stilts. Ceiling and walls are stained in black and white. The characters comment:

"But why the Germans destroyed these beautiful Roman ships?"

"Because they're German!"

After walking in the burned hall, they transition to the other side, where they walk through the exhibition already described. In front of the bronze tiles, they say:

"Those bronze bands there were used to reinforce the sides of the ships, for protection."

"They look like abstract paintings, don't they?"

Petri describes the reactions of middle-class Italians at the end of the Fifties

31 Attachment to the letter cited in footnote 23.

32 *L'assassino*, directed by Elio Petri (Titanus, 1961), 27' 41"-30'00" [https://youtu.be/oN8uXs\\_6jVE?feature=shared&t=1640](https://youtu.be/oN8uXs_6jVE?feature=shared&t=1640) (last accessed November 2024).

Fig. 14

Figure 14 Still from the film *L'assassino* by Elio Petri in the ruins of the fire that destroyed the ships.

to the new setting: the visit starts with a moment of superficial remembering and continues with a similarly superficial interaction with the surviving objects. In both moments there is both visual and physical engagement. Even with the caveat that a film setting isn't necessarily accurate (in this case it certainly isn't, as some objects have been clearly moved), it is nonetheless possible to make some considerations.

First, it seems that the ruins are accessible, the debris evened out so that it is possible to walk on it. Secondly, there is no separation between the two areas: not only by visual connection, but physical passage is possible. These elements depicted in the movie add a strong memorial layer to the setting. In this case, the overall visit combines an emotional part, where physical evidence of destruction is displayed "as it is"; and a rational one, where various devices are used to recreate the lost objects. Both settings are on the same plane and communicate with each other.

The essential museography of the Museum is depicted in a complex montage by Petri, using many camera angles, static and moving frames. Starting from typical Neorealist themes, Petri's gaze leads the visual narration in new directions, away from the literal context, leading to surreal atmospheres. The director's peculiar poetics, which can't be discussed here, find fertile ground in the new museum setting. This scene represents a fundamental document both for the reconstruction of the setting itself and its reception.

## Aftermath

The museum was reopened on the 25<sup>th</sup> of November 1953, and remained in service until 1963, when it was closed again. On the 14<sup>th</sup> of December 1988, after heavy restoration works that altered both the 1940 and 1953 exhibitions, it was reopened. Windows at the ground level were closed, skylights on the roof covered with plastic shields, ground floor levels were changed once more, the pit filled with rubble, and original steel windows frames replaced with anodised aluminium ones. The Roman bronzes that had been kept in Palazzo Massimo in Rome never came back to Nemi and are now exhibited in a dedicated room at the National Roman Museum. Today, after a non-systematic series of minor modifications, Nemi's Museum displays a confused mix of objects coming from the ships, from previous exhibitions, and from unrelated nearby archaeological areas.

## A museum of Reconstruction. Discussion and Conclusion

The reconstruction of the Nemi Ships Museum is not an exception in the general process of museum reconstruction in Italy. Intensive Allied bombings of



Italian cities greatly damaged cultural heritage. Almost every city had a major museum to reconstruct: relevant among others are Palermo, Naples, Rome, Florence, Genova, Torino, Milano, Verona, Treviso<sup>33</sup>. In many cases, buildings were repaired to hide as quickly as possible the scars of war, removing its traces<sup>34</sup>. But often it was “too hard and painful as a destruction to allow a simple reconstruction as it was”<sup>35</sup>. Such was the trauma of destruction that it couldn't be healed with an impossible return to the past. Thus, museum reconstruction in the Fifties became the symbol of a possible redemption, the spiritual leap Italy needed<sup>36</sup>. Destruction created the conditions for the modernisation Italian museums longed for, it became the opportunity to catch up to modern technology museography. This spirit was particularly perceivable in Milan, arguably one of the most damaged cities in Italy. The Pinacoteca di Brera, Museo Poldi Pezzoli, Pinacoteca Ambrosiana, Galleria d'Arte Moderna in Villa Reale, Castello Sforzesco were all heavily damaged<sup>37</sup>. Charismatic Superintendent Fernanda Wittgens (1903-1957) proposed what she called “modernised recovery”<sup>38</sup>: architects dealt with the problem of reconstructing the missing parts in different ways, often introducing modern elements within the historical material. Similar ideas circulated also in Naples, where Bruno Molajoli (1905-1985) completely reorganised the museum system, Torino, where the Galleria Civica di Arte Moderna was built by Carlo Bassi and Goffredo Boschetti in the voids created by a collapsed town block, and in several authorial reconstructions such as Palazzo Abatellis (Palermo), Castelvecchio (Verona) by Carlo Scarpa, Palazzo Bianco (Genova) by Franco Albini. In some cases, the destruction was used instrumentally, as the archaeological site of Palestrina restored by Furio Fasolo, where bombs had exposed the huge ancient sanctuary buried underneath the village. In all these cases, a simple return to the original state wasn't deemed acceptable.

Nemi's museum reconstruction of 1949-1953 is somehow in an intermediate position. On the one hand, the building was repaired as it was, all signs of war

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33 For an accurate and well documented reconstruction of Allied bombings in Italy, see Marco Gioannini and Giulio Massobrio, *L'Italia bombardata. Storia della guerra di distruzione aerea 1940-1945* (Milano: Mondadori, 2021); for more specific studies on the destruction and protection of the artworks, see the recent exhibition of the Gallerie del Quirinale, Gallo, Luigi, and Raffaella Morselli, ed., *Arte liberata. Capolavori salvati dalla guerra* (Milano: Electa, 2022). See also sources cited in footnote 15 and 21.

34 Such as with Uffizi in Firenze, or the anastylosis of Tempio Malatestiano, see, among vast literature: Lorenzo de Stefani and Carlotta Coccoli, *Guerra monumenti ricostruzione. Architetture e centri storici italiani nel secondo conflitto mondiale* (Venezia: Marsilio, 2011); and Giulia Ceriani Sebregondi, “La ricostruzione del Tempio. Il restauro post-bellico del Tempio Malatestiano di Rimini”, *La Rivista di Engramma*, no. 61 (January 2008): 28-45.

35 Using the words of the superintendents reporting in those years. See Simona Rinaldi, “Strappi preventivi”, in *Musei anni '50. Spazio, forma, funzione*, ed. Maria Cecilia Mazzi (Firenze: Edifir, 2009), 26.

36 As stated in: Marisa Dalai Emiliani, *Per una critica della museografia del Novecento in Italia* (Venezia: Marsilio, 2009), 78.

37 The Brera Pinacoteca had 30 out of 34 exhibition halls completely collapsed. See: Maria Cecilia Mazzi, *Musei anni '50. Spazio, forma, funzione* (Firenze: Edifir, 2009), 85.

38 On the topic a vast bibliography is available, for an overview, see: Antonella Huber, *Il museo italiano: la trasformazione di spazi storici in spazi espositivi: attualità dell'esperienza museografica degli anni '50* (Milano: Lybra, 1997), 88-91, 135-143; Dalai Emiliani, *Per una critica della museografia del Novecento in Italia*, 91-110; Maria Cecilia Mazzi, *Musei anni '50. Spazio, forma, funzione*, 45-50, 110-113; Paolo Morello, “La ‘museografia del dopoguerra’. Opere e modelli storiografici”, in *Storia dell'architettura italiana. Il secondo Novecento*, ed. Francesco Dal Co (Milano: Electa, 1997), 406-410; Fabio Fabbrizzi, *Lezione italiana. Allestimento e museografia nelle opere e nei progetti dei maestri del dopoguerra* (Firenze: Edifir, 2021), 262-265.

cancelled from the exterior, with the overall architectural structure remaining untouched. On the other hand, the loss was too big to allow the reconstruction of the ancient ships and an impossible return to the original interior scheme. In this sense, Nemi is an exception: most of Italian museums suffered heavy damage to the buildings, but managed to save large parts of their collections by moving them to safe places. This allowed to reconsider the exhibition space with the objects themselves as basis, in a valorisation process involving mostly the design of interior space. As pointed out by scholar Marco Mulazzani, the long-standing tradition of the Italian Museum as an “internal museum” was amplified by the process of reconstruction. Architects could experiment with decontextualisation, display of stratification, scalarisation, thus producing some of the most innovative experiences of Italian museography. None of this happened in Nemi. The museum wasn’t repurposed for new meanings, no new concepts were introduced. The overall display structure was simply scaled down to the size of the surviving remains. Morpurgo’s building was very different from those common “museum conditions”<sup>39</sup> and was perhaps too modern to allow significant rethinking.

The redemption of Nemi Ships Museum, without the possibility to be achieved through innovation, came by re-enactment of the past, and, consequently, a process of memorialisation. This is particularly evident with the transport of the models inside the halls, and it is just as readable through the analogies with the previous display. The memory of the lost ships is fragmented in episodes that building a narrative within the exhibition.

The display of ruins is a very strong choice that has rarely, if ever, been adopted in an Italian museum, and creates a link with war memorials (Berlin, Hiroshima). The use of ruins for memorial purposes in Italy is a subject yet to be thoroughly explored, and it is difficult to find parallels.

It may be possible to explore similarities with the Monument of the Fosse Ardeatine, geographically close. It has a similar division in two moments: the first, the ruined caves, the site where the mass killing happened, is the physical proof; the second, an emotional elaboration of the trauma in the half-submerged graveyard. But this case is very different from Nemi: it belongs to the world of cemeteries and sanctuaries, dealing with the tragedy of loss of life, with a longer tradition than the memorialisation of the loss of cultural heritage.

Perhaps the closest post-war Italian experience may be the setting of the Villa Reale in Milano, and in particular the Picasso exposition in the hall of Caryatides in 1953; left intentionally as it was ruined by the war, designed by Gian Carlo Menichetti with the collaboration of Piero Portaluppi<sup>40</sup>. Picasso’s large paintings

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39 “Museum conditions” is a methodological term used by Huber, Mulazzani, Polano in *Il museo italiano: la trasformazione di spazi storici in spazi espositivi: attualità dell’esperienza museografica degli anni ‘50*, 13-27; for the study of Italian museums: “*Museum conditions* must be the informatory starting point; this is information on any previous orderings, on the history of the collections, the characteristics of the site, new technologies, materials and on the organizational aspects and workings of the institution and include elements of ideology, requirements of the commissioning body and of justification”.

40 Fabbrizzi, *Lezione italiana*, 173.

were placed directly on the ground, in the grand hall surrounded by shredded sculptures on the walls. Physical testimony of the bombardment juxtaposed pictures' emotional elaboration, combining memorialisation and museography.

Moreover, in Villa Reale, as in Nemi, there is a process of interiorisation of the ruin, allowing it to be included within the framework of the "internal museum". Differently from memorials, the building as perceived from the outside is repaired and fully functional, reconnected. Destruction is not an extraneous object, exposed outside to create contrasts with everyday life, but is kept inside, domesticated, as an exhibition setting. It becomes a new stratification, a new "museum condition", freezing a moment in time.

The internalised ruins of Nemi freeze in time the fatal night of May 30, 1944, in an enduring transitory state. Internalising of physical space becomes interiorisation of a historical state, the ruin as an interior – a whole new category – pushes the boundaries between museography and memorial architecture.

The Nemi Ships Museum, in contrast with Milan's Picasso exhibition, doesn't need an author – the emotional effect of the burned ships is too strong, the spatiality of the museum too staggering. The reconstruction project is limited to a humble collection of the remaining pieces, and a didactic explanation of what it was.

Even assuming the display of the ruin wasn't completely intentional, its reception by a sensitive intellectual such as Elio Petri tells us the importance that it could have had within the history of museums during the Reconstruction of Italy. A history that didn't survive to this day.

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