

## **Embodying History. Evocative and Empathetic Power of Costumes, Arms and Props in the *Palio di Legnano***

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### **Abstract**

Recently, numerous local communities in Legnano (Italy) have been involved in defining and planning the forthcoming “Museo del Palio di Legnano”. Through a project of co-production, citizens have been asked to share their knowledge with heritage and museum professionals, as well as to ponder on the protection and enhancement of their cultural heritage. In particular, they have worked on the articulation of their personal and collective memories through the analysis of specific objects like costumes, arms and theatrical props used during the Historical Parade. In this context, objects can be considered as essential tools in staging and embodying identities. Costumes are perceived as a fundamental element in living and performing and infuse the past and its tradition in contemporaneity. Thus, the medieval ‘in style’ costumes can be analysed under different perspectives: they represent the evolution of the idea of ‘embodiment’ and ‘historical authenticity’, as well as the identity of the Palio communities.

### **Content**

The *Palio di Legnano*: A Brief History  
The Historical Parade: Performing Identity Through History Embodiment  
Towards the Future: Costumes, Jewellery and Arms as Social Tools  
Why engage local communities in museum practices?  
Sharing knowledge through museum co-production  
Conclusions  
References

### **The *Palio di Legnano*: A Brief History**

Legnano is an Italian city located in North-western Italy, close to Milan. From the late twelfth century, it was the summer seat of the archbishops of Milan and a place of refuge for the Milanese noble families and, between the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, it has been considered as the most important industrial manufacturing centre in Northern Italy - often nicknamed the ‘Manchester of Italy’. Actually, the city is mainly known for the decisive battle that took place on 29th May 1176. On this date, the army of Emperor Frederick, the 1st ‘Barbarossa,’ clashed with the Italian Free Commons in Legnano (Grillo, 2010). According to tradition, just the year after the battle, the inhabitants of Legnano began to celebrate their victory against the Emperor with numerous games and religious celebrations (Marinoni, 1976, p. 265; Marinoni, 2015, p. 115).

Although the origins of the *Palio di Legnano* date back to the beginning of the thirteenth century, it is currently not possible to give a precise date for the beginning of the celebrations. A Milanese decree (28th May 1393, Archivio Storico della Città di Milano) reports that the commemoration of the battle had already been celebrated for over a century (Marinoni, 1976, p. 265). Furthermore, the Lombard scholar Galvano Fiamma, in his *Chronicon Maius*, tells how the year after the battle, Milan decreed

that every year people should commemorate the event with a "solemn festivity" (Marinoni, 2015, p.115).

Due to the political importance of the Battle of Legnano, as well as to its celebrations, commemorations, and, because of the game of the Palio, a traditional horse race, during the sixteenth century the archbishops of Milan recognise it as a "Religious and Civil Festivity" (Balestracci, 2015; Palmieri-Marinoni, 2018, p. 19). From 1876 onwards, the celebration became increasingly important, due to the creation of the historical parade: the first in Italy (Palmieri-Marinoni et al., 2018, p. 20). Despite the suspension for war reasons during the 1940s, it is essential to point out that since 1876 the *Palio di Legnano* and its Historical Parade have been celebrated uninterruptedly.

### **The Historical Parade: Performing Identity Through History Embodiment**

The *Palio di Legnano* is given by three specific and indissoluble moments: the religious services - which date back to 1176; the historical parade, performed since the mid-nineteenth century; and a horse race (Balestracci, 2001; Marinoni et al., 2015). Beside these, we can also identify other moments which mark the life of the city (Marinoni et al., 2015, p. 242). The Palio is therefore a horse race, but it must be considered as the union of several elements; among them, the historical parade is actually the most significant one. Indeed, the historical parade, with about one thousand five hundred local performers, is the moment that actively involves the whole city and the entire hinterland of Legnano.



**Figure 1.** Dressed for the historical parade, 1935. Accessible at: <https://www.paliodilegnano.it/>

As Pravina Shukla (2015, p. 3-5) argues, the costume is the primary tool for creating and performing identity. In the case of Legnano, the performativity expressed by the costume has involved different social levels since 1876: from the local level, i.e. the "contrade" (the eight districts in which the city is divided since the thirteenth century) and the city, to the entire Italian nation. In fact, through the

staging of medieval history, Legnano and its historical parade, have contributed to the establishment of national identity since the 1940s (Balestracci, 2015, p. 120; Palmieri-Marinoni et al., 2018, p. 19). If with the end of the Second World War, the national identity value gradually disappeared (Ghirardo, 1996), the Historical Parade is still the element that expresses the identity of the local communities, i.e. the *contrade*, as well as the city of Legnano itself. Moreover, since 2013, as a feast of the Lombardy Region, it also represents the regional identity.

Today the historical parade, almost a century and a half after its first edition, is not perceived as a secondary moment to the celebrations of the *Palio* (Marinoni, 2015, p. 305), rather it represents the essence and identity of the *Palio* itself.



**Figure 2.** *The historical parade, 2014.* Accessible at: <https://www.paliodilegnano.it/>

Therefore, the parade is the expression of how a historical event is strongly rooted in the local identity; and how, through its annual staging, and the wearing of historical costumes, as well as the use of historical weapons, jewellery, etc., a community not only transmits the memories of a historical event but, at the same time, the very memory of the tradition of the re-enactment itself.

### **Towards the Future: Costumes, Jewellery and Arms as Social Tools**

Since 1876, the *Palio di Legnano* has continuously been engaged in the creation of costumes, jewellery, arms and accessories aimed to stage this moment of particular importance for all the communities in Legnano. Because of its complexity, the *Palio* can be identified as a cultural marker in identity-making at local and national levels; it also represents the realisation of local traditions and identities through the transmission of costume experiences. Indeed, thanks to an active involvement both in tailoring and performing the parade, costumes are properly to be considered as fundamental tools. These elements also allow a reflection on their specific essence as well as on their vitality. Moreover, the peculiarity of Legnano produced numerous donations, especially in the theatrical field.



That has made the cultural heritage of Legnano a fascinating archive even for the history of nineteenth century stage costume. In 1925, the Palio Charter defined the stylistic experience of the historical parade through principles of historicism and theatrical hyperrealism. Thus, since the 1930s, the historical accuracy which derives from this approach has distinguished the Legnano historical parade from other Italian experiences - as Siena, Asti and Ferrara. In order to support this mission, academics has been charged in designing costumes for the historical parade.

Another characteristic of Legnano, is that since the 1930s it has been established that every object concerning the parade must be made exclusively within the *contrade*. Because of a lack of professional tailors, goldsmiths, or gunsmiths with expertise in historical reconstruction, people in Legnano started to train their *contradaioli* (members of the *contrada*) through direct teaching experiences, like in a medieval workshop.

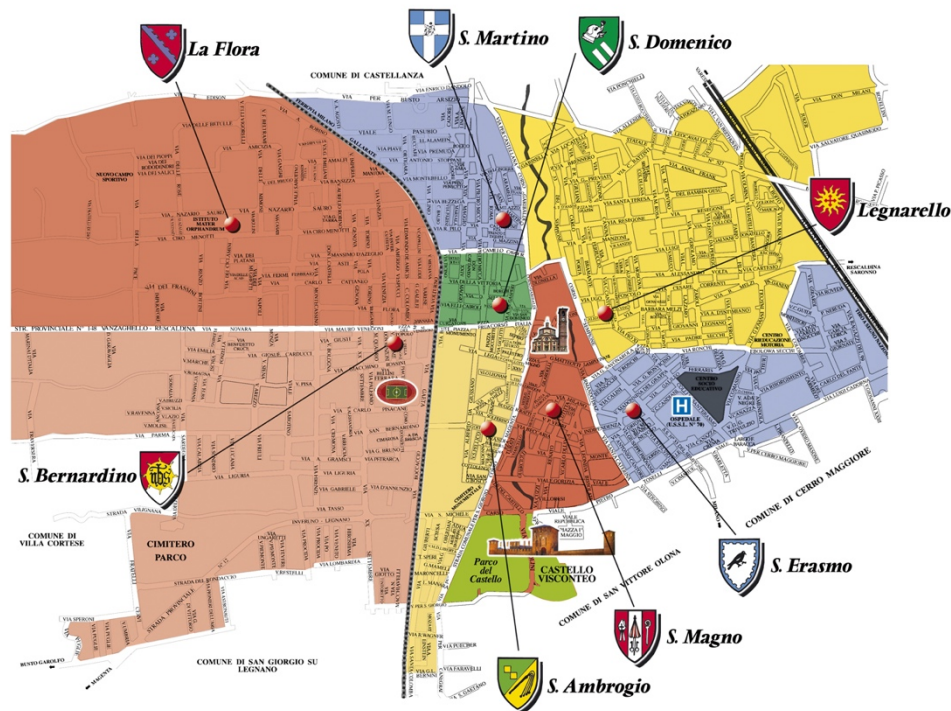


**Figure 3:** Each object must be made within the *contrade*.  
Accessible at: [www.contradalegnarello.it](http://www.contradalegnarello.it)

The increasing need to create new costumes and props, as well as to update the assets for the staging of the historical parade led, over the years, to a greater awareness of training new generations who could still perform what was established in 1925. A fundamental turning point has been the establishment of the "*Commissione Permanente dei Costumi Storici*" (Palio Permanent Costume Committee) in 1992. The aim of this commission, composed of academics, and people from the *contrade*, is to bring awareness on the questions concerning historical costume. In addition to presenting projects related to costume, jewellery and arms, since the early 1990s the commission denotes itself for a continuous training, in which academics hold lessons on the history of costume for local communities. Such an educational involvement of the numerous Palio's communities, as well as citizens who are not part of this realm, has led to a greater awareness of the cultural and historical heritage expressed by the parade. As a consequence, people in Legnano started calling for the need to preserve memories and traditions.

Although since 1976 we can trace a series of costume exhibitions concerning the Palio, a real critical approach to costumes was established only in 2018. Through a critical organisation of the complete heritage stored inside the *contrade*, researchers and scholars could trace the history of the objects – more than 20.000 – relating to the historical re-enactment. Besides, this activity helps the communities to rediscover both forgotten objects and the no longer traceable ones. Actually, this catalogue is the first opportunity to study and regain both the local textile manufacturers and the handcraft history, which is a proper Palio's expression. The Legnano case testifies to all the numerous stories and experiences expressed through the objects of its historical parade.

It is crucial to notice that what we have shown till now is a precise will of the *contrade*. Because of this self-awareness, today the historical parade is perceived as the most interesting example of how historical authenticity corresponds to the need of local communities in recognising themselves in costumes. The elements of the historical parade, therefore, speak the same language as the local communities. Given the craftsmanship and designing worth, these objects are a tangible expression of local identity and know-how.



**Figure 4.** Map of the city of Legnano with the *contrade* noted. Accessible at: <https://www.paliodilegnano.it/>

Besides costumes, the real co-starring actor is the territory, i.e., the *contrade*. The connection to local communities is fundamental to ensure life to the Palio; not only because within the districts people preserve memories and the spirit expressed by the objects, but because it is in this context that the transmission of knowledge takes place, and multiple territorial identities are expressed. The evocative power, generated by the intertwining of several stories linked to a single object, comes to life when the historical parade crosses the streets of the city. This cultural performance, indeed, involves also all those communities that come into empathetic contact with objects, perceived as "mediums" which give life to tradition and history



**Figure 5.** Training workshop for costume. © A. F. Palmieri-Marinoni.

In addition, the *contrade* have started a series of training activities and internships with schools in the area according to the Italian Educational Project “*Alternanza Scuola Lavoro*” (Legge 107/2015). It is a unique educational experience, which contributes to making a new generation even more involved in the *Palio* and, at the same time, it has fostered responsibility in young people through sharing knowledge, skills and values. In particular, textile objects play a

notable role in it, as they have been used as a tool of inclusion, allowing a dialogue between generations. The schools that take part annually in these projects contribute in designing and making costumes, acquiring skills and knowledge directly from the workshops inside the districts. This is not a simple educational experience or an activity: knowledge sharing is a crucial moment in the process of history embodiment, as well as for the transmission of traditions.

### **Why engage local communities in museum practices?**

Given the nature of the heritage related to the *Palio*, which is characterized by the coexistence of intangible and tangible, historical and social values, it has been necessary to address challenging questions concerning the identification, interpretation and preservation of identity meanings. In fact, if on the one hand the material aspects of this heritage require the use of discipline-driven preservation methodologies; on the other hand, such preservation has to take into account that cultural practices and everyday participation play a powerful role in creating social cohesion. For this reason, the *Palio* should not be considered as a merely visually appealing performance, rather as the embodiment of the relationships between identity and memories, both personal and collective. It should be understood as a ‘taskscape’ (Ingold 1993), where everyone plays a role and people are responsive not only to their own activity, but also to each other’s activities as these are appropriated by the division of labour. This active participation draws all the individuals together in the overall project of the re-enactment. Thus, in order to develop a representative narrative of this cultural practice it is necessary to include different voices, not only the expert in position of authority but also laypersons’ articulation of heritage and identity values. The engagement of everyday values entails that preservation practices should replace top-down approaches to participation with bottom-up methodologies able to actively involve people. As argued by Fairclough, it is fundamental to put people ‘at the centre, not on the periphery of the debate and of decision making’ (Fairclough, 2009, p. 37). However, people’s understanding of heritage values is often different from that of heritage professionals – when not in conflict. Moreover, the authority of expertise assessment risks generating tensions between experts and laypersons in the definition of what is heritage, consequently inhibiting participation (Roe 2013; Schofield 2014). Given this context, the question we address is: how could the planning of the future museum avoid the possible frictions between different actors?

The variety of values and meanings embedded in this cultural tradition implies that the project of the future museum has to tackle various challenging questions, but at the same time it provides many opportunities to explore ethical issues related to the preservation and management of the heritage – both in its tangible and intangible elements. The first issue we have to manage is the shift from an



'unofficial' to an 'official' heritage (Harrison 2013). In fact, the process to have the *Palio* (with its objects as well as practices) recognized by the Italian Minister of Cultural Heritage is still in progress. This legal acknowledgement entails that the heritage will have to be preserved following specific requirements which are defined by heritage professionals and discipline driven. However, to what extent can we 'fix' this living heritage – in particular the cultural practices which are experienced in the everyday life – through material preservation principles? The second question is connected to the coexistence of 'tangible' and 'intangible' values. In fact, intangible heritage (which is represented by knowledge, songs, practices and symbols) play a notable part in the *Palio*. Consequently, the on-going construction and re-construction of identity values represents a compelling element in the definition of what to preserve and how. Could this heritage be preserved as it is now? Or should prominence be given to the management of change? The third issue concerns the definition of 'ownership'. If the *Palio* belongs to local communities, does its heritagisation and museumification risk dispossessing people of how do they conceive this heritage?

Driven by these problematic questions, we decided to develop a project of co-production based on the 'hybrid forum' model (Callon, Lascoumes and Barthe 2011), understanding the museum as a space where experts, non-experts, ordinary citizens and authorities come together to negotiate values and meanings. The principle underpinning this method is the 'parity of participation' (Fraser 2003), as we would like to provide a space where all members of society can interact with one another as peers, in order to overcome potential hierarchies.

### Sharing knowledge through museum co-production



**Figure 6.** The Contrada San Domenico Museum. © A. F. Palmieri-Marinoni

The idea of a museum dedicated to the *Palio* (to its history and traditions, to its knowhow, to its past but also to its present) developed in 2011. At that time, two *contrade* already had some sort of internal museum, where they exhibited the objects used during the historical parade (costumes, arms, jewellery as well as documents); four other *contrade* are actually planning theirs. Such objects were selected by the members of the *contrade* as representative of their history and charged with significant memories, meanings and values. These *contrade* do not only elaborate interesting museological

projects, but they are also culturally active through the organisation of exhibitions dedicated to various aspects of the historical parade as well as the identity values embodied by this performance. A section dedicated to the historical re-enactment is also hosted in *Castello Visconteo*, another historical symbol of Legnano. In this case, the objects are selected by heritage and costume professionals or academics, on the basis of discipline standards.



**Figure 7.** Gallery view, *Castello Visconteo*.  
© A. F. Palmieri-Marinoni

The actual project of the museum aims to bring together the different natures of these two museological examples and to integrate the local expression of the 'contrada museum' with a central museum. The most urgent issue is therefore how to preserve and exhibit this living heritage, so that its dynamic nature would not be inhibited, and to understand how heritage and museum professionals could work with local people, sharing knowledge and

decision power. The development of a representative narrative of this cultural practice thus implies the inclusion of different voices, not only the expert in position of authority but also laypersons articulation of heritage and identity values, through the negotiation of different needs and expectations. The aim of this project is to limit the creation of hierarchical relationships by sharing decision power.

The rationale underpinning this project is that the Palio museum should become a space where local people, heritage professionals and authorities can meet and negotiate values and meanings. The first step in the construction of a trusting relationship was to organize a series of meetings during which we explained our idea of a museum as a 'hybrid forum' (Callon et al. 2011) of active engagement. Moreover, we decided to engage people in the decision-making process through a project related to the writing of labels, which we called 'shared museum labels.' What we asked of participants was to work on a selection of objects – which had been chosen by the members of the *contrade* themselves - and to describe them from their point of view, to express how they perceived these objects, and what memories they had of them. The labels were presented during an event in May during which every *contrada* opened its manor to everyone, in order to share their heritage. It was on this occasion that the labels produced during the workshop were exhibited together with the objects they related to.

## Conclusion

The understanding and definition of the *Palio di Legnano* is complex, as it is bearer of multifarious interpretative layers. This cultural performance cannot be simply considered a re-enactment. In fact, its complexity goes beyond the fantasy role-playing characterized by an appropriation of both real and imagined past (Agnew, 2004). Likewise, it cannot be summarized within the experiences of living history (Agnew, 2007), since the context in which it takes place must confront the present (Handler and Saxton, 1988). The *Palio di Legnano*, through its Historical Parade, is a deeply rooted bottom-up expression of local identity and belonging. This implies that any future museological approach to it will have to engage with communities through decision-making processes and awareness of its social value.



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