

Public Health History Corner

A historical laboratory in Rome

Roberto Bucci

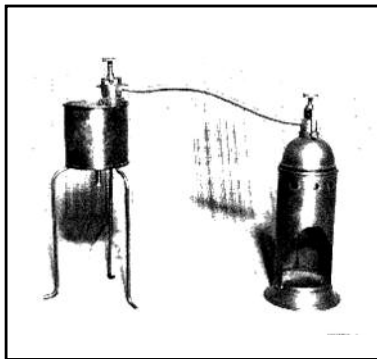
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Visitors who climb the austere stairs of the Giuseppe Sanarelli Institute, headquarters of the Public Health Sciences Department, in the University La Sapienza of Rome, may experience a strange feeling: the steps follow one another identically, yet each seems taller and more difficult than the last. It is as if, with every step, time reveals its stories, experiences; ever larger and harder to sustain.

Following the corridor it is impossible not to pause and reflect upon the displays of memories and details belonging to the past. There is a constant sensation, almost tangible: it is as if each of the objects, so dense with memories, want to take you on a fantastic voyage to another time and place. Objects made of wood, copper and other materials that come from the past, filled with the scent of a world that no longer exists. With each step your desire to meet a guide who will shed light into this fascinating universe grows stronger. Then, as if by serendipity, he appears to you at the end of the corridor. A mild face, a friendly glance that traverses the world of memorabilia. Riccardo Montacutelli, technical official of the museum and employee of the institute for the past 55 years, is a modern Virgil who does not inspire awe; he is instead the elderly and friendly companion that you had been hoping to meet. It is as if he has the same scent as the objects that he has helped so miraculously to survive over the years. With his good-natured smile and full of all of the jollity and irony of a true Roman, his mind is like a key that opens many doors yet never rusts, ready to unlock the secrets of a jealously kept kingdom: the Laboratorio d'Epoca.

Visitors first encounter an overview of the building site, the first Institute of Hygiene, engraved on copper plates, with the original marble plaque dedicated to Corrado Tommasi-Crudeli, its founder. Following on, a collection of bronze busts of his successors from 1953-1988: Vittorio Puntoni, Vittorio Del Vecchio and Salvatore Ugo D'Arca. The busts of the previous directors (Corrado Tommasi-Crudeli, Angelo Celli, Dante De Blasi) are stored in the Historic Library. Giuseppe Sanarelli's bust, the scientist whose name was given to the current Department of Public Health Sciences, is placed in the lobby, still in its original position since its inauguration. The second section includes equipment for applied physics, with particular attention to the monitoring of climate and microclimates: temperature, solar radiation, humidity, barometric pressure and illumination. The third section is devoted to microbiology, with related equipment including: microscopes, thermostats and stoves. A small bottle containing nutrient broth - the label shows the city and year of production: Valentine's Meat Juice, Richmond, April 25, 1871, remains perfectly preserved in an airtight container, completely intact it has never been used. The researcher who placed it there 139 years before probably never imagined its illustrious fate!

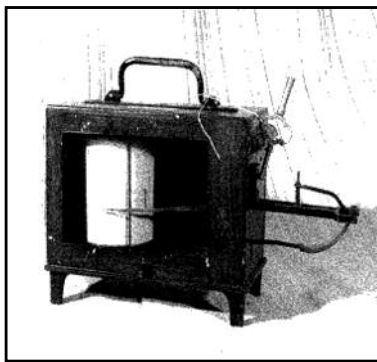
A vintage collection of dyes, reagents and glassware complete the section. Also included here is the histology section, which is important for rabies research which was carried out routinely at the Institute of Hygiene since its foundation until recent times.



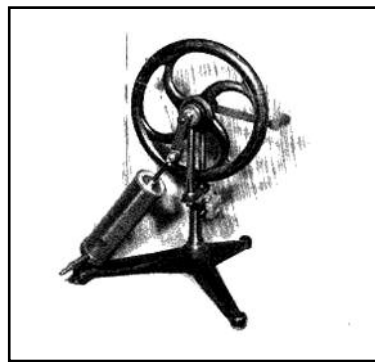
Salleron still for determination of alcohol content in wine.



Wroclaw machin (or Flugge Machine) for gaseous disinfection by formalin.



Richard thermograph (or Bourdon bulb) for recording the temperature of a given period of time.



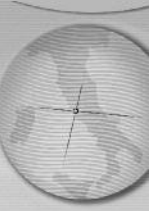
Munke pump to take samples of known volumes of air for micro-bacteriological testing.

The fourth section presents a rich variety of vintage equipment used for disinfection and sterilization, such as autoclaves, pots, stoves and lamps. It houses an important collection of Bunsen burners as well as the valuable publication on the subject written by Prof. M. Talenti who, for over 50 years, had a great interest in the Institute's chemistry activities. His custodianship played a fundamental role in the recovery and preservation of most of the appliances in the museum. The fifth section houses the applied chemistry lab in its many aspects of analysis and control: centrifuges, extractors, polarimeters, colorimeters, and spectrophotometers.

The sixth section is devoted to food. It houses an incredible collection of 37 mushrooms exquisitely made in the 1930's by hand, in ceramic, by the micologist Dr. Quintarelli. The seventh section shows old equipment for the analytical control of drinking water after sampling, transportation, chemical and bacteriological examination, and water purification systems. The eighth section contains a series of plaster models faithfully reproducing various types of channelling utilized in the city of Rome for wastewater estrangement.

All these locations, tell a story that began long ago. The history of Public Health in Rome.

The story begins in 1824, with the teaching of Hygiene in Rome, following the papal bull "Quod divina sapientia" by which Pope Leo XIII introduced this new discipline in the curriculum of medical studies of the Papal States. Hygiene was not yet independent. It had to share knowledge, resources, methods and studies with the teachings of political-legal Medicine and Pharmacology. In particular, combined with Pharmacology, it took the name of Hygiene and Materia Medica



and was taught at the Pontifical University.

It was in Rome that Gaetano Valeri, became the first “official” Italian hygienist. After Rome was unified to Italy in 1870 amendments to the laws of medical teaching resulted in Hygiene becoming an autonomous discipline, with Gaetano Valeri, being the first in Italy to have the title of “Professor of Hygiene”.

On Valeri’s death, Corrado Tommasi Crudeli was appointed Director (1883) but the Institute could not immediately meet the practical teaching demands in which Tommasi Crudeli firmly believed. The Institute of Hygiene was inaugurated after 1885 in a building near Viminale Square, with a lecture on climate change in Rome. A considerable number of objects that accompanied this story were present in 1885, and can be found today, wisely kept in the Laboratorio d’Epoca. Each of these priceless artefacts were transferred in 1935 to the new headquarters, at the Giuseppe Sanarelli Institute.

At the end of the visit, Riccardo Montacutelli invites you to sign the visitors register. But there is also another register he shows with the care one has for the precious things: an old book of reservations to the tennis court of La Sapienza University. Leafing through the yellowed pages carefully, we discover who has played tennis on February 20 1937 from 2 to 3 pm. There is a signature. It’s not easy to read, but we can: Enrico Fermi.

References

Il Laboratorio d’epoca come museo. Catalogo Fara GM, Simonetti D’Arca A, Montacutelli. R, Del Vecchio R (Ed.) [The Laboratorio d’Epoca as a Museum. Catalogue]. Rome: Edizioni Kappa, 2003.

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