

From Refectory of the Jesuits to Museum of Physics

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History of the Collegio Massimo Refectory

The Museum of Physics of University of Naples Federico II is housed in the ancient Refectory of the Jesuit “Collegio Massimo” in Via Mezzocannone 8 (Figure 1).

The construction of the monumental Refectory is part of the expansion of Collegio Massimo carried out at the end of the 17th century. The pre-existing 16th century structures were almost demolished in order to implement the project of Valeriano, which provided for the construction of the house of the Fathers and schools around a majestic double-order courtyard.

The building of the new church – based on the project of the Jesuit Pietro Provvedi – was followed by the construction of the large refectory, the adjoining kitchens, services, and the new library, which is currently housing the Royal Mineralogical Museum.

Majestically designed by Dionisio Lazzari, the new refectory welcomed hundreds of Fathers and a great number of the finest walnut wood seats adorned with stucco and paintings.

Following the expulsion of the Jesuits, the Collegio was used as a public school under the name of “Casa del Salvatore” (House of the Saviour) until 1777 when it became the seat of University.

During the 19th century, the Refectory was mainly used for solemn university ceremonies and has kept the

function of Aula Magna until 1908 when the Rectorate was transferred in the new headquarters located in Corso Umberto I.

This very moment marks the beginning of a progressive decay of the structure which was promptly swarmed with chemical products and plants.

The project of restoration and enhancement of the spaces began in early 2000s and came to an end with the positioning of the *Circumcision* by Marco Pino da Siena in the hall. The painting – stored at Palazzo Reale since 1943 – was originally projected for the 16th century church of Gesù Vecchio. Upon request of the University and with the consent of the Superintendency the painting returned to the Jesuit complex.

The restored Refectory became the Museum of Physics’ original seat, and it was inaugurated on January 28th, 2005.

From 2012 the museum is part of Museum Centre of Natural and Physical Sciences.

The Museum

The Museum is home to roughly 800 instruments

– mostly from the 19th century – which are direct evidence of the fervent scientific studies and discoveries carried out in Naples.

A conspicuous nucleus comes from the University’s Physics Laboratory, instituted in 1811 by Joachim Murat.



Figure 1 - Hall of the Physics Museum, Former Jesuit Refectory. (Photo © Centro Musei delle Scienze Naturali e Fisiche dell’Università di Napoli Federico II)

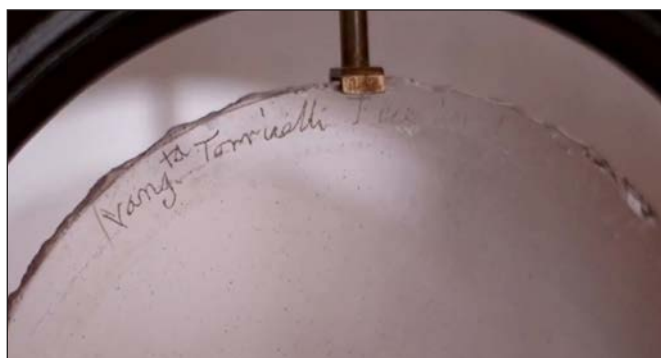


Figure 2 - Objective lens for telescope signed by Evangelista Torricelli, 1645. (Photo © Centro Musei delle Scienze Naturali e Fisiche dell’Università di Napoli Federico II)

The most prestigious part of the collection comes from the Royal Laboratory collection which began with Charles III of Bourbon and reached its highest splendor with Ferdinand II.

With the Unification of Italy part of the Bourbon collection was inherited by the University Cabinet.

Worth to mention due to their historical value are also the instruments designed or used by Macedonio Melloni, the great physicist from Parma who also became the first director of the Vesuvius Observatory.

The Museum is composed of 4 rooms and is organized according to a thematic criterion, except for some large instruments which, due to logistical problems, have been placed in the Salone.

The first room is dedicated to acoustics and exhibits a prestigious collection of instruments, many of which are signed by the German physicist Rudolf Koenig, including his famous harmonic analyzer, which allowed to identify the frequencies composing the sound through an acoustic-optical transduction.

Of considerable interest is a tuning fork of 140 cm, made by the French maker J. Lancelot, whose 80 cm prongs are equipped with additional masses that can be fixed at different heights and can slightly vary the frequency.

The second room is dedicated to the most significant and prestigious objects of the Royal Collection, among which the objective lens for telescope (Figure 2) stands out: it was built in 1645 and signed by Evangelista Torricelli. The splendid sundial in the shape of a truncated pyramid, in gold and silver, in which the finger of a small putto acts as a gnomon.

The same space houses a model of locomotive, still in working order, donated to Ferdinand II by Robert Stephenson, the famous English locomotive maker, to celebrate the first Italian railway inaugurated in 1839 on the route Naples-Portici.

Fully dedicated to fluid mechanics, the third room houses instruments such as the Magdeburg Hemispheres in brass, the pneumatic pump with high plate and Babinet's tap, as well as a hydraulic winch and an intermittent fountain which, when in operation, never fails to astonish the visitors.

The fourth room corresponds to the former Refectory of the Jesuits: right in the center stands the magnificent altarpiece by Marco Pino while all around the 19th century furnishings flaunt on the one hand the instruments of optics and on the other those of electromagnetism.

The environment is further enriched by some large instruments such as Duboscq's telescope, Atwood's Machine, Morin's Cylinder and the large tiered lens with a diameter of 120 centimeters, built in Paris in 1845 by Henry Lepaute and used by Macedonio Melloni to perform measurements on the radiant heat of the moon (Figure 3).

Due to its size and beauty, the hall is now also used for the organization of conferences and events.

Scientific Outreach

The museum is to make the collections known and available, and to promote the dissemination of Physics' history through several educational and outreach programs developed to meet the expectations of different types of audiences. Today, the Physics Museum is a dynamic place where visitors can embark on a fascinating journey that includes not only scientific discoveries, but also art and history.



Figure 3 - Large Fresnel lens built in Paris by Lepaute, 1845. (Photo © Centro Musei delle Scienze Naturali e Fische dell'Università di Napoli Federico II)

Rosanna Del Monte è attualmente direttore tecnico del Museo di Fisica dell'Università di Napoli Federico II. Si occupa della cura, conservazione e valorizzazione delle collezioni storiche del museo, di didattica museale e di divulgazione scientifica.