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Behind the Exhibit: Displaying Science and Technology at the National Museum of Science and Technology Leonardo da Vinci in Milan

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Science and technology museums are important places of production, appropriation, and dissemination of scientific and technical knowledge. Created in the nineteenth century, these museums expanded in the inter-war years thanks to the financial support of both the state and private industry. Many industrial museums opened in those years, while many existing museums planned to transfer their collections and exhibitions into new and more spacious buildings. From the very beginning, politics had a significant impact on the history of these museums and on the narratives they wanted to communicate. After World War I, as temples of progress, innovation and political and economic supremacy, many of these museums flourished, directed by two opposing drives: on the one hand, a growing technological nationalism, and on the other hand, a strong ideal of internationalism among nations. My talk focuses on the case study of the Italian National Museum of Science and Technology Leonardo da Vinci in Milan and the great interest in science and technology exhibitions and museums that spread throughout Italy during the 1930s. The museum was established in 1953 in Milan under the auspices of Guido Ucelli, an influential engineer working as general manager at Riva. Ucelli had been trying for a long time to create a museum of technical and industrial devices following the main examples in the field. The opening of the museum dedicated to the “genius” of Leonardo was the result of a long and complex planning phase that lasted more than twenty years and had its roots in the 1930s. The story of this museum allows us to retrace the long-term and complex process that in post-unification Italy has led to recognize, also by the law, scientific collections and museums as cultural heritage.

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