

# Stefano Cardu, an Italian Contractor in Siam at the End of the 19th Century: His Life and His Art Collection

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**ABSTRACT**—The Stefano Cardu Museum of Siamese Art in Cagliari displays an important collection of Oriental art which was collected by Stefano Cardu during the thirty years he spent in Bangkok in the last quarter of the 19th century, while working successfully as a building contractor. In 1914 Cardu donated his collection to the city of Cagliari that is now one of the most important Siamese art collections outside Thailand. This article aims to provide a new and fully documented reconstruction of various phases of Cardu’s life through a comparative analysis of unpublished information available in the archives of Bangkok and Cagliari and works of art in the collection. The gift of the collection to the city of Cagliari is a well-known philanthropic gesture, but at the same time, it hides a complex bureaucratic controversy between the donor and the town administrators, that is here reported through the letters of Cardu and related public documents. Furthermore, this article aims to celebrate two important anniversaries: the centennial of the donation in 1914 and the first opening of the Siamese museum at the City Hall in 1918.

## Introduction

The Stefano Cardu Museum of Siamese Art (Museo d’Arte Siamese Stefano Cardu) in Cagliari displays an important collection of Oriental art, which the Sardinian traveler and art collector Stefano Cardu gathered during his long residence in Siam in the last quarter of the 19th century. In 1914 Cardu donated his collection to the city, which was exhibited in the Siamese Museum founded in 1918. The museum is now named after him and dedicated to his memory.

Ugo Ugo, the director of the Siamese Museum from 1969 to 1977, illustrated the life of Cardu in two articles which appeared in the magazine *Il Cagliariitano*, entitled “Grande amatore Stefano Cardu che ci regalò il museo Siamese” (1977), followed by “Dietro il museo Siamese c’è pure l’eros” (1998). These two contributions constitute the main sources about the life of Stefano Cardu until now. Nevertheless, these articles are based, as the author states, on many vague stories provided by Rosaria, Cardu’s niece, and they do not even clarify Cardu’s donation to the city of Cagliari. The later publications of Fossati and Paderni, based on those works of Ugo, do not add meaningful information

and do not even report the donation.<sup>1</sup> What is known about the life of Cardu still belongs much more to legend than to fact. For all these reasons, the foremost intention of this article is to provide a reliable and fully documented biography of Stefano Cardu, while trying to clarify specific aspects of his story.

First, I will describe the period of his life spent in Bangkok, of which even now very little is known, highlighting his achievements as a construction entrepreneur, and identifying some of the extraordinary and important people he met while creating his art collection. Second, I will try to propose the most probable date of his return to Europe, and identify some highlights among his gift of Asian artworks, trying to understand Cardu's motivations and the contemporary legislative, bureaucratic and social obstacles he faced. Finally, I will try to explain the meaning of the collection for the city of Cagliari from a historical as well as educational point of view.

This research has been realized through access to all the documents and the personal correspondence of Cardu in the Cagliari archives,<sup>2</sup> enriched by additional information on his working life in Bangkok found in Thai language magazines of the 19th century, which Dr. Pirasri Povatong has kindly translated and made available to me.<sup>3</sup> By comparing historical, documentary and artistic evidence, this article points out new meaningful and unpublished information, thus also helping to celebrate two events: the centennial of the 1914 donation and that of the 1918 opening of the museum.



Figure 1. Stefano Cardu with his wife Rosa and their daughter Luigia (after Ugo 1977)

## Stefano Cardu in Siam

Stefano Cardu was born in Cagliari, Sardinia, on 18 November 1849. He was the only son of a family of craftsmen. He undertook nautical studies, but he interrupted them in 1864, when he was fifteen years old, to work as a cabin boy on a merchant ship. After ten years at sea he became Master Mariner. In 1874 Cardu arrived in Siam in unknown circumstances. One of the more fanciful stories offers the possibility of him being shipwrecked in the Malay Archipeligo and having to swim to safety among sharks.<sup>4</sup>

Cardu decided to take up residence in Bangkok.<sup>5</sup> The Siamese periodical *The*

<sup>1</sup> Fossati-Dondi 1998: 7-11; Paderni 2013:12, 16-17.

<sup>2</sup> All documents in Italian have been translated into English by the author.

<sup>3</sup> I want to thank Dr. Pirasri Povatong of Chulalongkorn University for sharing this information, even if not yet complete, and also for identifying and sharing the photos in the Bangkok archives about Cardu's life and work in Siam. I also wish to thank Tiziana Pontillo of the University of Cagliari and Juliana Kerestešová of Wall Street English for their valuable advice and assistance. To my beloved Balu-Babu.

<sup>4</sup> This episode appeared in Cardu's obituary in the Sardinian newspaper *Unione Sarda* in 1933. Torlonia 1982: 68-70.

<sup>5</sup> Ugo 1977: 52.

*Directory for Bangkok and Siam* provides the first evidence of his presence in the country in 1879, including Cardu in a list of foreign residents.<sup>6</sup> Without any economic means, this first period could not have been easy for him. However, thanks to his technical skills, which he likely acquired from his family of carpenters, he was hired by an unknown English contracting businessman. Later, he succeeded in creating his own sawmill, and he began to build houses and buildings: constructions in teak for the private sector and roads and bridges for the royal court.<sup>7</sup> During that period, Siam, under the reign of King Rama V (1868 -1910), was a flourishing country undergoing deep economic and social transformations, while the city of Bangkok was a great construction site.

Povatong described the period and the close relationship between the Siamese and the “first generation” European architects present in the country:

In retrospect, the first two decades of Rama V’s reign was a transitional period, both in terms of architecture and the architectural profession. As the Siamese aristocrats taste grew increasingly Europeanized, both the royal master builders and the Europeans tried their best to serve their patrons’ needs. On one hand, the Siamese royal master builders still maintained some control over certain major architectural projects, especially traditional Siamese-style buildings like temples or cremation structures, but the Italian builders had also tried their hands at designing Siamese-style buildings as well. On the other hand, some of the royal master builders learnt how to design and built in the European styles, as we have seen in the works of MC Pravich Jumsai. Architecture of the Chakri Reformation was thus not simply an imposition of European forms onto the Siamese soil, but a complex collaborative project between the Siamese aristocrats, their royal master builders, and the European architects. As for the transformation of the building profession, this was also a transitional period when Siamese patrons and royal master builders had to learn the ways European builders worked. Large firms like Joachim Grassi’s and Cardu’s employed an increasing number of Europeans architects and engineers, some of whom would be crucial to the establishment of the Public Works Department in the late 1880s.<sup>8</sup>

In 1881 Cardu was employed as a Draughtsman in the H.S.M. Architect Department,<sup>9</sup> and planned the palaces of Prince Krom Phra Sudaratratchaprayum and Chao Fa Chaturonratsami.<sup>10</sup> In December 1882 he presented a blueprint for the new Court of Justice<sup>11</sup> and he expanded the Saranrom Palace.<sup>12</sup> In August 1883 he completed the Praisaniyakan building, the first post and telegraph office in Thailand.<sup>13</sup> Cardu then

<sup>6</sup> The Directory 1879: 313.

<sup>7</sup> Unione Sarda 1933.

<sup>8</sup> Povatong 2011: 132-133

<sup>9</sup> Directory 1881: 300f.

<sup>10</sup> R5 1881: 6, 471; 12, 317; CRF Povatong 2005: 154 – 155.

<sup>11</sup> Povatong 2005: 39-40

<sup>12</sup> R5 1882: 15.

<sup>13</sup> Praisaniyakan 1883: 100, 57

created a new construction company, *S. Cardu & Co. Building Contractors* in 1885, where another Italian man, G. Coroneo, was employed.<sup>14</sup> In 1887 Cardu moved his office to Khlong Kut Mai, and began work on the Saranrom Gardens, the famous public park.<sup>15</sup> In 1888, he was both the designer and contractor for the structures for the cremation ceremony of an unknown prince, coordinated by the royal master builder That Hongsakul (1828-1885).<sup>16</sup>

In 1888 Cardu's company became an enterprise, *The S. Cardu & Co., Architects, Civil Engineers & Contractors*, where many craftsmen were employed, located on the western side of the Chao Phraya river, in front of the Roman Catholic Church of the Calvary.<sup>17</sup> In 1889 Cardu expanded the Military College adding two new buildings of two floors and later in 1891, he redesigned the façade of the complex (Figure 20).<sup>18</sup> The *Bangkok Times* on 23 July 1892 described the Military College, and reported how much Cardu was respected and appreciated:

Some two and a half years ago the Government sanctioned the building of a new Military College, capable of accommodating 160 cadets, on the southern side [of] the War Department. The work was entrusted to Mr. Cardu, who both designed the edifice and contracted for its erection. ... The exterior of the building, which is designed after the style of the German Renaissance, is well-proportioned and tasteful. ... The interior of the building is severely plain but shows substantial workmanship everywhere. The ceilings, floors, staircases, etc., are of solid teak throughout. ... The Government are not unnaturally very well pleased with the result attained by Mr. Cardu, which is not inferior to that reached by him in the erection of the Foreign Office, the Treasury, the Survey Office, Educational Department, and many other buildings inside and outside the Palace wall.<sup>19</sup>

Clearly, Cardu's success as an entrepreneur gained him the trust of officials in the relevant public departments, while allowing him to accumulate significant income and a respectable social position.<sup>20</sup> He also met the the great and the good who visited Siam at this time. Indeed, Prince Augusto Torlonia mentioned Cardu's success in his letters from the East in 1887, describing him thus: "... engineer Cardu from Cagliari, who made a huge fortune working hard for thirteen years".<sup>21</sup>

Povatong points out the fervent effort Cardu needed to achieve his success:

As both Cardu and Grassi had their own businesses, they had to work their way through the traditional patronage system of the Siamese elite in order to get jobs.

<sup>14</sup> Siam Directory 1885: 301f.

<sup>15</sup> Siam Directory 1887: 313; KT 1887:(L) 42,2. Povatong 2011: 112.

<sup>16</sup> BT 1988: "The Coming". On That Hongsakul, see Povatong 2011; 123-25.

<sup>17</sup> Siam Directory 1888: 313.

<sup>18</sup> BT 1889: "Local".

<sup>19</sup> BT 1892: "The New Public" (translated from Thai by Povatong).

<sup>20</sup> Povatong 2011: 129-133; Sran Tongpan 2004: 245.

<sup>21</sup> Torlonia 1892: 70.

As there were a limited number of architectural projects that required the service of European builders, competition among them were quite fierce.<sup>22</sup>

While there is little personal information available about Cardu during his time in Siam, he met his most precious treasure, his beloved wife Rosa Fusco (born in Naples on 2 February 1870), a daughter of musicians living in Bangkok.<sup>23</sup> They adopted a French girl, Luigia Le Bailly of Inghieu (born in Paris on 14 February 1893).<sup>24</sup>

### Creating the collection

Stefano Cardu had a great interest in culture, history and the customs of Indochina, and in addition to Italian, he could speak fluent English, French and Thai.<sup>25</sup> On 15 April 1881 Prince Tommaso of Savoia, Duke of Turin, on his visit to Siam asked Cardu for help organize a party on his ship, the *Vettor Pisani*, for the members of the Siamese committee who welcomed visiting foreign dignitaries.<sup>26</sup> In 1887 Prince Torlonia also wrote how enthusiastically Cardu had explained elephant behavior to him.<sup>27</sup>

His huge financial success sustained Cardu's passion for art, allowing him to assemble an outstanding collection of valuable artworks, coming not only from Indochina, but also India, China and Japan, countries that he probably visited.<sup>28</sup> Besides beautiful Japanese ivory *okimono*, *netsuke* and coffins, numerous Chinese Qing porcelains and some Indian Brahmanic bronzes, the Cardu collection comprises mostly 19th century Siamese works of art.<sup>29</sup> Among many little Siamese Buddha images, two bronze standing jeweled Buddhas of the Bangkok period, and an ivory sitting Buddha in *bhūmiśparsamudrā* dating to the reign of King Rama IV (1851-1868) are of considerable importance. There is also a corpus of fine *bencharong* and *lai nam thong* wares, silver and gilded silver niello wares, as well as beautiful silver repoussé boxes from Chiang

<sup>22</sup> Povatong 2011: 131

<sup>23</sup> Torlonia 1892: 68-70

<sup>24</sup> Cardu 1917; Unione Sarda 1933.

<sup>25</sup> In an inventory handwritten written by Cardu on 26 April 1923, among various personal objects and works of art, numerous books on Oriental history and culture, as well as English, French and Siamese dictionaries are listed. These books include: "Edwin Arnold, *The Light of Asia, The Great Renunciation* (London 1879), Beauvoir Ludovic, *Voyage autour du monde. Australie, Java, Siam, Canton, Peking, Yeddo, San Francisco* (Paris 1875), La Loubère Simon, *The Kingdom of Siam* (Paris 1693), Chaumont, Alexandre, *Relations de l'ambassade de Mr le Chevalier de Chaumont à la cour du roi de Siam* (Paris 1685), Osbeck Peter, *A Voyage to China and the East Indies* (London 1771), Neale, F.A., *Narrative of a Residence at the Capital of the Kingdom of Siam; with a Description of the Manners, Customs, and Laws of the Modern Siamese* (London 1852), Torlonia A, *Undici mesi in viaggio* (Città di Castello, Lapi 1892). All twenty-four issues of the quarterly magazine *The Siam Repository*, (Jan 1869 – Oct 1874), are also present (Cardu 1923: 3).

<sup>26</sup> Savoia 1881; cf Fossati-Dondi 1998: 5.

<sup>27</sup> Torlonia 1892: 70

<sup>28</sup> In the 1923 inventory, Cardu describes a Japanese cabinet that he bought in Japan and "directly transported in a special double box with all the cares and precautions so that it arrived intact. It cost 200 pounds thirty years ago, transport or, rather, the several transports, not included" (Cardu 1923: 5). It is possible that Cardu purchased the cabinet in Japan, maybe in 1895. Indeed, *The Siam Directory* points out that in 1895 Cardu was not in Siam.

<sup>29</sup> On Cardu's collection, see Fais 2016.



Figure 2. Scenes from *Ramakien*. a. Hanuman and Benyakai. CC 648. b. The building of the causeway. CC 648. c. Indrajit injures Lak. CC 645. 37 x 88 cm. Tempera on paper, Bangkok school. Siam, 19th century. (Courtesy © 2018 Musei Civici Cagliari)



Figure 3. *Samut Thai* manuscript. The life of Phra Malai. 66.5 x 14 cm (closed). Khoi paper, golden lacquer cover. Siam, 19th century. CC 25. (Courtesy © 2018 Musei Civici Cagliari)



Figure 4. Buddha in *parinirvāṇa*. L. 38 cm. Ivory, gold leaf, gilded wooden base. Bangkok school. Siam, 19th century. CC. 284. (Courtesy © 2018 Musei Civici Cagliari)



Figure 5. Singha lion. h. 11.5 cm. Ivory. Bangkok school. Siam, 19th century. CC 280. (Courtesy © 2018 Musei Civici Cagliari)

Mai, Laos and Burma (Myanmar). Five *Ramakien* paintings in Bangkok style (Figure 2) are among the rarest works in the entire collection and illustrated manuscripts of the life of the monk Phra Malai (Figure 3), astrology and medicine complete the holdings of Thai paintings.<sup>30</sup>

The collection of Indochinese weapons is one of the most significant of its kind in Europe. It includes Indonesian and Malaysian steel daggers and kris with *pamor* designs, alongside Burmese and Siam daggers with carved ivory hilts and scabbards and many Shan and Lanna silver embossed and filigree daggers and swords. Imposing Siamese *tuan lao* spears, with some shorter Indonesian ones, form a really impressive group as well. Additionally, the collection includes assorted objects of great interest like silk textiles, clothes, small lacquerware pieces of furniture, several ivory musical instruments, box fragments and royal seals, gambling tokens, commemorative medals and coins, jewels and opium pipes. Perhaps most notably, placed in the main museum entrance to welcome visitors is a Karen rain drum (also known as Type III (under Frantz Heger's classification of 1902), similar to the one King Rama IV gave as a gift to Napoleon III (reigned 1852-1870) in 1861, which is today exhibited in the musée Chinois at Château de Fontainebleau in France.

In his collection catalogue, Cardu wrote in 1918 that many of the Siamese items had been given to him by eminent court nobles,<sup>31</sup> and he also reports his familiarity with royal artisans. Some items produced by them appear of remarkable quality and value:

Hexagonal yellow Siamese tea cup, decorated with red and green flowers, estimated as very rare, donated by Prince Chackraphat.<sup>32</sup> (Figure 6)

Red porcelain tea cup, with lid and saucer, decorated with gold flowers, which was donated for the cremation ceremony of an unidentified prince.<sup>33</sup>

Grey ceramic teapot with silver applications: very fine quality, donated by S.E. Kromatah, the Minister of Foreign Affairs at that time.<sup>34</sup> (Figure 7)

Silver repoussè coffee pot, creamer and sugar bowl, finely adorned with mythological figures and decorations in high relief. The king ordered this set from the royal goldsmith as a gift for S.A.R. the Count of Turin but disliked it and ordered a finer and more lavish one. The first set was later sold.<sup>35</sup> (Figure 8)

<sup>30</sup> Regarding these *Ramakien* paintings, see Fais 2016a; the Phra Malai manuscript has been identified by the author, see Fais 2010: 13.

<sup>31</sup> Cardu's close relationship with members of the court is shown through a signed letter by King Rama V to the English Consul Thomas Knox, which Cardu possessed and is now part of the collection. The letter describes the private holdings of the king, various rents and an eviction request for an Indian-British man (C.C. 533). Fossati Dondi 1981: 66.

<sup>32</sup> Cardu 1918: 27.

<sup>33</sup> Cardu 1918: 37. Photograph not available.

<sup>34</sup> Cardu 1918: 38.

<sup>35</sup> Cardu 1918: 31.





Figure 6. Bencharong footed hexagonal cup, h. 5.5 cm, Porcelain with red and green patterns on a yellow background. China, 19th century. CC (Cardu Collection) 206. (Courtesy © 2018 Musei Civici Cagliari)



Figure 7. Teapot. h. 16.5 cm; d. 11cm. Earthenware, with a silver mount at the end of the spout, decorated with a Foo dog on top of the lid. China, 19th century. CC 92.92bis. (Courtesy © 2018 Musei Civici Cagliari)



Figure 8. Silver tea service: 8a (above): Teapot h. 24 cm, CC 87; 8b (above right): Milk jug h.11 cm, CC 88; 8c (below right): Sugar bowl h. 8,5 cm, CC 89. Chased and repoussé silver, decorated with Theppanom (celestial deities) and mythical animals within lotus-petal shaped panels. Siam, 19th century (Courtesy © 2018 Musei Civici Cagliari)



In 1897 Cardu purchased a Japanese samurai katana with a richly carved ivory hilt and sheath, commissioned by the Japanese community living in Bangkok as a gift for King Rama V, who was at that time on an overseas trip. Referring to the katana, Cardu wrote:

Japanese sword, hilt and scabbard richly sculpted in ivory. This sword had been created by an eminent Japanese artist who required many years to carry out the job – it had to be given as a present from the Japanese community to the King of Siam; but at that time the king was abroad, and then the sword was sold.<sup>36</sup> (Figure 9)



Figure 9. Katana (detail), ivory, steel and silk, 110.5 cm. Meiji period, Japan, 19th century. CC 1190. (Courtesy © 2018 Musei Civici Cagliari)

### The return to Europe and the donation

It is still rather difficult today to establish how long Cardu stayed in Siam and the date of his return to Europe. In all his correspondence Cardu never reports an exact date of departure, only affirming in one letter that he had been in Far East for “almost thirty years.”<sup>37</sup> The *Bangkok Times* reported on 12 January 1899 that Cardu and his wife were preparing a trip to Europe, and that they would be back in Siam within five months.<sup>38</sup> Yet it appears that Cardu did not return to the East again, a fact confirmed by several objects in his collection. There are numerous Siamese coins and medals bearing the date R.S. 116 of the Ratanakosin era, corresponding to 1898,<sup>39</sup> which confirms that Cardu was still

<sup>36</sup> Cardu 1918: 13. Due to Cardu’s brief description, among the four Japanese swords in the collection, Fossati rightly assumed that the katana made for the king was the one richly carved with scenes from the life of Bodhisattva Jizō Bosatsu (Kṣitigarbha), protector of travelers, children and the forgotten tombs of ancestors. Fossati 1981: 171; Fais 2010: 150.

<sup>37</sup> Cardu 1919.

<sup>38</sup> BT 1899: “Local”.

<sup>39</sup> The Ratanakosin era began on 6 April 1782 with the crowning of King Rama I (reigned 1782 -1809), founder of the Chakri dynasty.

in Siam that year. However, there are no objects dated 1899 or later, and for this reason, it is likely that his journey to Europe in 1899 proved his final farewell to Siam.

On his return, Cardu remained in Europe until his death. It is possible to assume that he landed in London, where in fact he deposited his collection with a museum which he did not identify in his correspondence.<sup>40</sup> Wealthy and with no financial or other obvious concerns, he traveled through England, France and Italy, visiting many museums in London, Paris and Marsiglia.<sup>41</sup> Finally, he decided to return to Cagliari in around 1900. He did not accept the tempting offers of an English museum interested in purchasing his collection, and he requested that the boxes containing his precious materials be sent to Sardinia.<sup>42</sup>

Back home, Cardu bought a vast manor called “Sa Tanca’e Nissa”, near the village of Capoterra, at an auction held by the Bank of Italy. He spent a considerable sum of money on renovations and to start up agricultural activity, without much success. He was then forced to sell the farm in 1913. Despite the failure of this project, his finances were still apparently solid and, therefore, he wrote the following letter on 22 June 1914 to Ottone Bacaredda, Mayor of Cagliari:<sup>43</sup>

For a long time, I have been willing to give to my native city a modest collection of weapons, porcelains, bronzes and ivories, which I collected during my long stay in the Far East. And now that the new City Hall is nearly completed, I would desire that my collection were placed there, in a small room, to my memory. The collection does not contain objects of great value, but some of them are greatly precious, really rare and hard to see even in the great museums of foreign countries: only for this (reason) it has a certain merit.<sup>44</sup>

The City Council gladly accepted the donation of the “modest” art collection on 3 July 1914.<sup>45</sup> A room on the second floor of the renovated City Hall, between the Mayor’s office and the Wedding Room, was prepared to host the Siamese Museum, the first municipal museum. (Figures 10, 11) Cardu actively participated in the decor, personally designing the cabinets intended for the display of the collection, which were manufactured by the cabinetmaker Enrico Campagnolo.<sup>46</sup>

On the occasion of the inauguration of the museum, Cardu proposed to organize a special exhibition to raise funds for orphans of the First World War. For this exceptional event, by means of a letter dated 12 September 1917, Cardu, in addition to the material already donated, temporarily also made available a new series of Oriental objects he had kept for himself. He specified that the works of art he was lending had to be given back to

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<sup>40</sup> The British Museum and the Victoria and Albert Museum have many objects donated by Cardu in around 1908, but yet to be studied and catalogued.

<sup>41</sup> Cardu 1923: 5; Ugo 77: 53 note 1.

<sup>42</sup> Ugo 77: 52.

<sup>43</sup> Ottone Bacaredda, Mayor of Cagliari, 1911-1917 and 1920-1921.

<sup>44</sup> Cardu 1914.

<sup>45</sup> Resolution files 1914.

<sup>46</sup> Cardu 1923c.



Figure 10. Stefano Cardu and Luigia near the City Hall, Cagliari (Courtesy © Musei Civici Cagliari)



Figure 11. City Hall, Cagliari (Photo Francesco Canu)

him at the closure of the exhibition, six months after the end of the war. He also required a very specific legal contract in regards to this donation with a detailed list of all the objects to be returned to him, without any possibility of veto from the city administration.<sup>47</sup> On 21 September 1917 Giuseppe Manno, the Prefectural Commissioner,<sup>48</sup> accepted the conditions and terms required by the donor.<sup>49</sup> But the notary deed was not yet finalized. The museum opened in 1918, and Cardu personally wrote a catalogue of the exhibits.<sup>50</sup> At the end of the war, in a letter dated 13 April 1919, Cardu communicated the list of the objects under his ownership to be returned, and he asked, once again, that this be stipulated in the notarial deed of donation.

However, Giuseppe Manno never returned these artworks, because, in his words:

... it would not be acceptable without incurring in a serious and grave responsibility towards the city, to allow the dismemberment of an art collection by now very famous, admired and appreciated, removing a remarkable part of its objects, and precisely those of greatest preciousness and value of all.<sup>51</sup>

Cardu responded to the Prefectural Commissioner as follows:

... concerning the value of the objects I have donated to the city and of the ones I want to be returned to my family as the only inheritance that I will leave them, I am here and perhaps also in Italy, the only competent judge. And I can add, with no fear of being contradicted, that the former is as valuable, if not more, as the latter. I can finally assure you that the collection I gave to the city is of such value and rarity, as a whole but also as single objects, that even the most important museums in Europe would be pleased to possess.

The situation had become increasingly difficult because Cardu in the interim had begun a failed auto business, which would lead to his economic ruin.<sup>52</sup> This last event justified Cardu making yet another urgent request to return the loaned objects:

... I have spent all my savings of almost thirty years of hard work in that torrid country. On the one hand I have believed it was my duty as a citizen to make my best to embellish one of the rooms of the new City Hall, on the other hand this doesn't imply that I have to deprive my family of these objects which will serve them as my memory, and eventually also as their income, since they will be certainly poor after my death.<sup>53</sup>

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<sup>47</sup> Cardu 1917.

<sup>48</sup> Giuseppe Manno, Cagliari's Prefectural Commissioner (interim town administrator), 1917-1920.

<sup>49</sup> Manno 1917.

<sup>50</sup> Cardu 1918.

<sup>51</sup> Library Archivist 1922.

<sup>52</sup> Ugo 1977: 52.

<sup>53</sup> Cardu 1919.

The return of Ottone Bacaredda as Mayor in 1920-1921 resurrected Cardu's hopes for a rapid conclusion to the controversy:

I remembered that one day in April 1921 I introduced myself to the lamented Commendatore Bacaredda and Commendatore Antonio Taramelli was also present. I explained to him my request to the P.C.<sup>54</sup> for the withdrawal of the objects and begged him to solve the problem. Mr. Bacaredda promised that he would immediately take care (of it). On that occasion, Prof. Taramelli also expressed his authoritative opinion to the Mayor on the artistic material value of the collection. The visit of the king came almost immediately later and for some time naturally I didn't want to disturb the mayor knowing that he was very busy. Everybody knows that shortly after Mr. Bacaredda returned from the continent, he got sick and I didn't have the opportunity to see him anymore.<sup>55</sup>

His uncertain financial situation pushed Cardu to offer his books for sale in 1923 as well as the last remaining Oriental works of art still under his ownership.<sup>56</sup> Clearly, Cardu's intention to sell these artworks caused the City Council to fear that if the demanded objects were returned to Cardu, they would also be sold and, therefore, lost. In fact, in a letter sent to the new Mayor Gavino Dessi Deliperi,<sup>57</sup> Cardu stated:

my family and I don't have, I swear to you, other ways to realize, with the sale of these objects, what we need to live in a less miserable way, because I madly (as someone said) lavished the income of many years of work on the purchase of the collection."<sup>58</sup>

... because of my not unremarkable sacrifice that I made for my city, I await therefore the action of justice you promised which gave me the right to hope"<sup>59</sup>

### The legal controversy

The protection of Italian cultural patrimony in that period was regulated by the Rosadi Law (L.364/1909) and by its Application Rule (r.d. 363/1913).<sup>60</sup> Under these laws the State established to prevent the sale and the dispersion of those objects to which the community attributed a historical and cultural value, and it established some restrictions

<sup>54</sup> The Prefectural Commissioner Giuseppe Manno.

<sup>55</sup> Cardu 1923c: 4.

<sup>56</sup> Cardu 1923. In the 1923 inventory many pieces of art are described, such as weapons, silver and porcelain wares, wooden cases and a beautiful Japanese cabinet. Cardu's original collection was much more substantial than the one extant in the museum today. Splitting this huge art collection was not due to the donation but had already begun in Bangkok a long time beforehand. Indeed, *The Bangkok Times* reported on 12 May 1894 an auction of arms and curios that Cardu and his wife were preparing. BT 1894: "Auction".

<sup>57</sup> Gavino Dessi Deliperi was Mayor of Cagliari from 1921 to 19 June 1923.

<sup>58</sup> Cardu 1923b.

<sup>59</sup> Cardu 1923c: 4.

<sup>60</sup> On the Rosadi Law, see Bottari 2002: 43-44.

that forbade their sale, destruction or alteration. As far as private goods were concerned, the State acquired direct control of those goods and the right of priority in case of sale by means of a notification sent to owners. Nevertheless, no ties or notifications were set on Cardu's goods. However, the Town Council seems to have enforced an informal right of priority, since the intention of the owner to sell the goods for which he asked the restitution were well known. Cardu in fact claimed to personally have seen the signature of Manno simply crossed out on the public act of restitution already prepared.<sup>61</sup> It now appears obvious that the Town Council simply took possession of the works of art without proposing any rightful refund to the legitimate owner.

A long and highly-charged legal dispute began. Cardu asked for the restitution of his objects or their purchase. He requested 200 lire for the works which the City Council had kept and 60-70 lire for the possible purchase, which never took place, of new objects still in his possession, that would have added to the collection on exhibit in the museum making it still more special.<sup>62</sup> Nevertheless, Cardu would have preferred the restitution of his goods, in the hope of making a much greater profit from their possible sale.<sup>63</sup> A letter from Cardu's lawyer, Matteo Careddu, to the Prefectural Commissioner Vittorio Tredici<sup>64</sup> sought a resolution to the dispute, which was now a matter of public knowledge.<sup>65</sup> The lawyer pointed out that since the public act had never been compiled, the donation was not valid. In this regard he correctly highlighted that:

... it would not be correct and opportune the refusal to return to Mr. Cardu the objects that he didn't want and doesn't want to give yet: instead I consider it necessary and more appropriate to reach the stipulation of the deed of gift ... Without this official document the donation does not exist and Cav. Cardu could have an afterthought, that would be disadvantageous for the public administration.<sup>66</sup>

The judgment that Carlo Aru, the Superintendent to the Monuments of Sardinia sent to the Mayor in 1923 helped Cardu's cause. He pointed out the rarity and the value of the collection:

I added that it would have been difficult to find a competent expert in Italy, where the public collections don't pick up works of art of this kind, where studies on this subject, investigations and illustrations do not appear, and finally where there are not great private galleries of exchange and sale, like the Ton Ying, Sparks, the Luzac in London or the Knudsne and the Lao in Paris. But now that it has been explained to me that I don't have to carry on a detailed evaluation, in which my incompetence could have damaged the affairs of the city, but one of general

<sup>61</sup> Cardu 1923 c.

<sup>62</sup> Cardu 1923 a, c; Library Archivist 1923a.

<sup>63</sup> Cardu 1923a.

<sup>64</sup> Vittorio Tredici was Cagliari's Prefectural Commissioner between 19 June 1923 and 1926 and Podestà between 1927 and 1928.

<sup>65</sup> Nunzi 1923, Dessi Deliperi 1923, Cardu 1923e.

<sup>66</sup> Careddu 1923.



Figure 12. The Siamese Museum at the City Hall in 1918 (Courtesy © 2018 Musei Civici Cagliari)



Figure 13. Municipal Art Gallery of Cagliari and the caves in the background (Courtesy © 2018 Musei Civici Cagliari)



judgment about the purchase, especially now that I have been informed that the general sum of L.125 to L. 150 for the all objects has been requested, I honestly believe it rightful to assure that such a sum is very much less than what Cardu could obtain from the sale of his objects in one of the great emporiums in London or Paris, that the City Council surely purchasing them for that suitable amount is an excellent bargain. And I am so fully convinced of this bargain that I don't hesitate to signal to you as Mayor of our city, the spirit of civic-mindedness of Cavalier Cardu, who is also alive at this time, a well-known period of serious financial disruption, renouncing a legitimate and sure speculation after he made an action of merit toward the city once again.

After five years, the action of the transaction was stipulated on 29 July 1923, and the Town Council bought the entire collection for 135 lire.<sup>67</sup> Stefano Cardu, "due to pressing family circumstances" left Cagliari and took up residence in Rome.<sup>68</sup> The momentous mementos of his fabulous Oriental adventure were lost to him forever.<sup>69</sup>

Even though Cardu received the Knighthood of the House of Savoy in around 1920 from Vittorio Emanuele Orlando, the Italian premier to whom he personally had shown his precious Oriental coins, this honor was not very rewarding for Cardu.<sup>70</sup> Indeed, the money he received from the sale of the objects did not improve or resolve his serious financial situation, with the result that in 1927 he asked the Town Council for a benefit, never granted, in honor of his generous gift.

Up till now I have received nothing, and I am so sorry about it and this has put me in a state of mind full of discouragement and bitterness.<sup>71</sup>

The curtain falls on this story with Cardu's last letter, written from Rome to the Podestà Enrico Endrich:<sup>72</sup>

Furthermore, Cavalier Contu has told me that you mean to transfer the Oriental Museum that I founded to the ground floor of the Building, and precisely in one of the rooms presently used as a reception, and that the whole material must necessarily be prepared in a more convenient and definitive way. Furthermore, Cavalier Contu told me to talk to you about a new illustrated catalogue of the objects in the collection, and that my presence in Cagliari would be needed. I would bring with me all the photos that I have of most of the objects but, it will be certainly needed to have photos taken of all the other objects in order to realize a beautiful and complete catalogue worthy of the collection and of the City. If as

<sup>67</sup> Deliberation 1923.

<sup>68</sup> Cardu 1930.

<sup>69</sup> "Regarding the two pins of tiger claws and the two Siamese rings, being mementos of my family, my wife desires to have them back, as I had declared to the Prefectural Commissioner." (Cardu 1923d.)

<sup>70</sup> Ugo 1977; 53.

<sup>71</sup> Cardu 1930.

<sup>72</sup> Enrico Endrich was the Podestà of Cagliari from 1928 to 1934.

I believe, you have in mind to make this project, I am ready to cooperate with all good wishes and with all of my strength.<sup>73</sup>

But this last proposal was never taken into consideration. Stefano Cardu passed away in Rome on 16 November 1933 at the age of 84, and was buried in the Verano Cemetery, where he rests next to his beloved daughter Luigia. His niece Rosaria, who took care of him in the last period of his life, commented:

His exceptional physical strength would have allowed him to live for a longer time, surely for many years, if he hadn't had the bitterness of the last period, that certainly disheartened his soul, and especially the observation of the ingratitude and indifference of the authorities of his beloved city during that time.<sup>74</sup>

### The museum as a symbol

In 1933, after Cardu's death, the Siamese Museum was transferred to the first floor of the City Hall in Cagliari. Some contemporary photos show that the walls of the room were covered with daggers and swords, and decorative silk drapes (Figure 12). The showcases, of vaguely exotic fashion, were full of materials of different origins and typologies. This was an example of the *in stile* set up, typical of the 19th century museum methodology of classification and display used in Italy in the first quarter of the 20th century. According to this methodology, objects were displayed against their original background, which was often only imagined and not reconstructed in a historically correct way. Later, during the Second World War, the collection was transported to the caves of the Public Gardens in 1939 where it remained until 1946<sup>75</sup> before being moved near to the Municipal Art Gallery of Cagliari (Figure 13).

Ugo Ugo, between 1969 and 1977, with the collaboration of the orientalist Gildo Fossati and the ancient weapons expert Giorgio Dondi, reorganized Cardu's collection, even if once again the display of collection ignored any attempt at a historical arrangement.<sup>76</sup> In 1981 the collection was transferred to the Museum complex known as the "Cittadella dei Musei", where it is now on permanent display. Even if the Cittadella dei Musei represents a suggestive location for the collection, which is now exhibited with a real scientific display, the symbolic function which it had in the City Hall is lost. In fact, the first Siamese Museum, set up in a room of the City Hall, had the same honorable and commemorative function that Chinese rooms, present in 18th century European palaces, possessed. These exotic environments derive from the famous late 16th century *wunderkammerns*, rooms used to exhibit unusual and exotic objects supposed to arouse wonder and to exalt the glory and wealth of the owner. The City Hall

<sup>73</sup> Cardu 1930.

<sup>74</sup> Ugo 1977: 53.

<sup>75</sup> Marini 1946.

<sup>76</sup> Fossati and Dondi published a brief description of the weapons collection in 1972, followed in 1981 by the first systematic collection inventory and by an informative pamphlet. In 1998 the two scholars wrote a short and controversial publication about the museum.



Figure 14. Cittadella dei Musei, Cagliari (Photo © Vittorio Garufi)



Figure 15. The Stephano Cardu Museum of Siamese Art, Cittadella dei Musei, Cagliari (Photo © Vittorio Garufi)



Figures 16-19. The exhibition halls of the Stefano Cardu Museum of Siamese Art, Cittadella dei Musei, Cagliari (Courtesy © 2018 Musei Civici Cagliari)



too could thus boast its room of Oriental wonders, as a symbol of glory and power, not only of one prince, but of the whole city.

Besides being one of the most important collections of Siamese art outside Thailand, the Cardu treasure can therefore also rightly be considered one of the most significant symbols of the history and the heritage of the city of Cagliari. The importance of this trove is also confirmed by numerous accounts of Cagliari citizens who have visited the museum between the two great wars, and who today continue to visit to see these works of art. Cardu's Oriental art treasures no longer belong only to the story of their original owner. The museum has thus become not only a repository of extraordinary historical, cultural and artistic treasures, but equally importantly, of personal memories as well.



Figure 20. The Military College, redesigned by Cardu in 1889-91, today the Royal Thai Survey Department, Bangkok (Photo Koala0090)

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### *Abbreviations*

AMCC: Archivi Musei Civici Cagliari, Galleria Comunale, Museo Cardu, Faldone 3

BT: The Bangkok Times

C.C.: Cardu Collection

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