The opening of the Antonio Pasqualino International Puppet Museum follows the establishment of the Association for the Conservation of Folk Traditions in 1965, the congress “Museografia e folklore”, organized in Palermo in 1967, and the enthusiastic collecting of some highbrows. Its history is deeply linked to its founder Antonio Pasqualino, who was a surgeon and an appreciated anthropologist expert of the history and culture of Sicily. He dedicated his researches to a theatrical form that, in the second half of the 20th century, seemed to be inexorably disappearing: Sicilian puppet theater – the Opera dei pupi. These enthusiastic researches led Antonio Pasqualino and some scholars to establish the Association for the Conservation of Folk Traditions with the primary goal of avoiding the disappearance of the Opera dei pupi – that was a real paradigm of the social universe of the Sicilian people –, and safeguarding and promoting folk traditions.

The initial focus of the collection – and the Association’s researches that would lead to the Museum foundation in 1975 – concerned Sicilian marionettes, the pupi (puppets). In those years, the decisive action of collecting and conserving objects that seemed to have lost life on stage as well as an audience, was associated to the encouragement of Sicilian puppeteers, the pupari, and to an intense supportive action aimed to help with gradual reintegration and promotion of the shows toward a new audience, different from the traditional one. These actions created a deep understanding between researchers, the pupari, and the few groups from the traditional audience that had survived the crisis of 1960s and thus were prized witnesses of the values of the past.
During those years, hundreds of recordings concerning traditional performances were collected in small towns; dozens of interviews with pupari and habitual spectators were conducted as to document this narrative and theatrical practice as a paradigm of a social universe; and the staging of new shows was observed. Within this extraordinary research experience, carried out in a period of deep transformations of the Italian and Sicilian societies, became soon clear that it was impossible to separate the Opera dei pupi from her historical and social background. On account of this fundamental idea the Museum adopted its first outline: it would not be the house of departed things but would combine research and theatrical activities.

All the collected material was for the first time displayed at Palazzo Fatta in 1975: the first location of the Museum. In this aristocratic palace with prestigious frescoed rooms, these objects were “redeemed” from their popular roots, started to be catalogued and underwent a typological and comparative analysis (cfr. Calvino 1984). A festival of Opera dei pupi sponsored the Museum opening and paved the way to a reflection on the relation between museography and reality.

The challenge of the Museum opening was handled by a determined and pugnacious group of experts scientifically led by the distinguished anthropologist Antonino Buttitta and the folklorist Giuseppe Bonomo, both professors at the University of Palermo where they drove forward the academic work in the field of Sicilian traditional culture started by Giuseppe Pitrè in 1913 and continued by Giuseppe Cocchiara till 1964. Following the approval of the city of Palermo and the renewed relation between the Opera dei pupi and the audience, the Association broadened its strategy: it undertook a purchase campaign that expanded the collections’ focus to non-European traditions; it scheduled shows that had not been performed in Sicily for years. Meanwhile, at the Museum a group of experts was engaged in the research, maintenance and cataloguing of the collections, as well as in the organization of thematic exhibitions and other initiatives both at the headquarters and in other cities. Over the years, the Museum has become one of the main theatrical and cultural organizations of Palermo thanks to its frequent activities in the city and important launches in national and international contexts.

In 1985, the Museum found a bigger and more functional location thanks to the Regional Government, and moved to a building in Via Butera that hosted the Hotel de France in 1700. Moreover, research on traditional ritual theatrical practices were undertaken concerning the theme of the anthropological grounds of theater as well as the relation between contemporary theater and non-European ritual and theatrical traditions. The metalinguistic approach to objects typical of the avant-garde movements was adopted, as well as their idea that the exhibition practice was possible and maybe even necessary. The interlaced issues raised by the various experiences and stimuli above mentioned met the trends of contemporary museography that helped gravitate the museum from a “temple of knowledge” for a few people to a place of global communication
aimed to a wider dissemination. In this wide horizon, the pupi tradition is living today a new life thanks to the various experiences of its young representatives.

After the premature death of Antonio Pasqualino, in 1995, the Museum – which is still managed by the Association for the Conservation of Folk Traditions – was named after him. Accordingly, to the aims defined in the Association's Statute, the Museum hosts education and/or orientation activities in the field of museography and cultural and performative initiatives are organized (e.g. exhibitions, publications, congresses, seminars, theatrical festivals, concerts, recitals, etc.).

The Museum conserves about 5,000 pieces, with specific reference to those used in traditional and contemporary puppet theater: marionettes, pupi, hand puppets, theatrical machines and posters from all over the world. The research activity started by Antonio Pasqualino originated the genesis of the Museum collection while engaging the Regional Government in a purchase campaign and in the cataloguing of the whole heritage related to the Opera dei pupi still existing in Sicily. The most part of the pieces bought by the Regional Government is now in custody of the Puppet Museum. The items used in the four traditions declared by the UNESCO as “Masterpieces of the Oral and Intangible Heritage of Humanity” are particularly relevant: the Opera dei pupi, the Japanese Bunraku, the Wayang Kulit from Indonesia, and the Cambodian Sbek Thom.

The collection of pupi from Palermo, Catania, and Naples is undoubtedly the largest and most complete one existing and includes three complete theatrical sets: one from Palermo, one from Catania, and one from Reggio Calabria. Other remarkable pieces are the hand puppets from Northern Italy and France (Guignol); the pupi from Belgium; the Turkish and Greek shadow puppets; the Burmese and Indian string puppets; the Asian shadows (from Malaysia, Siam, Thailandia, India, etc.); the African rod puppets (from Mali and Congo); the masks and puppets from Benin; and the hand puppets from Brazil and China.

The Museum also houses the Library “Giuseppe Leggio”: a unique center for the documentation and study of folk traditions, puppet theatre, and the Opera dei pupi. A collection of handwritten scripts is particularly prized, which belonged to important pupari such as Gaspare Canino and Natale Meli, as well as the collection of installment publications published between the end of the 19th century and the beginning of the 20th (with particular reference to the Storia dei paladini di Francia written by Sicilian writer Giusto Lodico – the main inspiration of the Opera dei pupi shows). In addition, the Museum has a multimedia library (photo, video and audio items) which houses the documents collected during the researches, the videos of the activities carried out, and of the shows performed. The photo archive collects the inventory images of the museographical pieces (mainly in black and white) and of the performances. The audio-video library includes about 300 reel tapes with recordings dating back to 1960s regarding the Sicilian traditional repertoires – those related to the Opera dei pupi, the cantastorie (story singers), and the epic-chivalric tales performed according to the traditional tech-
nique of the *cuntu* (literally “tale”) – and other forms of Italian and international puppet theaters (all of which are digitalized and freely available). Other similar materials collected since 1970s are part of a corpus that includes about 500 records on cassette tapes and almost 750 video recordings. The Library also conserves records of conferences, seminars, and the copy of interesting materials for ethnomusicologists. All of them were collected on behalf of the Discoteca di Stato (State Phono Archive) or in collaboration with the University of Palermo.

Beyond the numerous cultural and theatrical initiatives, the Association’s engagement in the safeguard and promotion of the *Opera dei pupi* led to sponsor its candidacy to the UNESCO aimed to include it in the List of Intangible Cultural Heritage. In May 2001, the UNESCO proclaimed the *Opera dei pupi* as a “Masterpiece of the Oral and Intangible Heritage of Humanity”.

**FIGURE 1.** Antonio Pasqualino and his wife Janne Vibaek in a Sicilian puppet theater (1960 ca.).
FIGURE 2. A. Pasqualino at a puppeteer’s home in Bangkok (1990).
FIGURE 3. Theater Hall.

FIGURE 4. Sicilian folksong workshop during a conference.
FIGURES 5–6. Sicilian puppet show (opra i pupi).
FIGURE 10. Japanese puppets (*bunraku*).

FIGURE 12. Vietnamese water puppet theater.
FIGURE 11. Indonesian shadow puppets (*wayang kulit*).
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