

Handicrafts, handlooms and dye plants in the Italian folk traditions

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In the paper, the various categories of artefacts and domestic/handicrafts uses of plants are reported, together with an inventory of all the plants used in Italy in human medicines, veterinary sciences, cooking, rituals and in other fields. Natural plant dyes used in Italy and musical instruments of Italian folk traditions have also been reported.

Keywords: Handicrafts, Handlooms, Natural dye, Basketry, Folk traditions, Italy

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In a culture by now almost levelled by globalization, studies on plant artefacts are important in order to contribute to keep the ethno-diversity of the local communities. Plant artefacts are products of history, economy and traditions of a certain area¹⁻⁶. Several diversified examples of typical artefacts are still now present in Italy. The rediscovery of the folk uses of plants is not only of historical and scientific value, but it could also represent a future economic potential for some areas of Italy. News on the handicraft folk use of plants in some Italian areas is found⁷⁻¹⁷. A synthesis of the knowledge in the field of the dye and handicraft uses in Italy has recently been reported¹⁸. In the paper, the various categories of artefacts and domestic / handicraft uses of plants are reported, together with an inventory of all the plants used in Italy in human medicines, veterinary sciences, cooking, rituals and in other fields. Some data on dye and handicraft uses in Italy are summarized below.

Basketry

The working of artefacts interwoven with stems of herbaceous plants and flexible/resistant branches of shrubs and trees seems to be contemporaneous or perhaps anterior to the first productions of ceramics, imitating the main shapes of these artefacts. Baskets and various containers for fruits, vegetables, pulses, wood, cheeses, grains, etc. were also made. *Ampelodesmos mauritanicus* P. Beauv. (Fig. 1), *Arundo donax* Linn. (Fig. 2), *Castanea sativa* Mill., *Clematis vitalba* Linn., *Fraxinus ornus* Linn., *Holoschoenus* sp., *Juncus* sp. (Fig.5), *Olea europaea* Linn., *Salix alba*, *Spartium junceum* Linn., *Ulmus*

minor Mill. are among the common species used for these purposes. The bark of bramble bush (*Rubus ulmifolius* Schott) is used to bind together stems and branches. The basis of chairs is made with *Typha latifolia* Linn. leaves. In Sicily, *Chamaerops humilis* Linn., *Cydonia oblonga* Mill., *Olea europaea* Linn. (Fig. 2) and *Punica granatum* Linn. are mostly used. In Sardinia, baskets and other objects are interwoven mainly with *Asphodelus* sp., *Chamaerops humilis* Linn. and *Triticum sativum* Lam.= *T. aestivum* Linn. Typical baskets are realized still now in Italy, for example, in Villanova di Bagnacavallo near Ravenna (Emilia Romagna), in Formia (Latium), Venafro (Molise), S.Vito Lo Capo (Sicily), Flussio, Tinnura, Montresta, Olzai, Ollolai, Castelsardo, Sennori, Sorso, Sinnai and S.Vero Milis (Sardinia)¹⁸.

Handicrafts

Typical objects are realized in several villages of the Alps with the wood of conifers (*Pinus cembra* Thunb., *Larix deciduas* Mill. and *Picea excelsa* Link = *P. abies* Karst.) and also of other trees, *Pyrus malus* = *Malus pumila* Mill., *Acer* sp. and *Juglans regia* Linn. These objects are mostly sculptures, toys, masks, pipes, goblets and engraved furniture. In Central Italy, traditional platters (*scife*) are made with *Acer obtusatum* waldst. & Kit. ex Willd. and *Fagus sylvatica* Linn. wood. In Latium near Cori and Turania, and in Calabria near Soriano Calabro, still rustic chairs are built. In Calabria (near Melissa and Brognaturo), pipes are realized with the root (*radica*) of *Erica arborea* Linn. The bark of *Quercus suber* Linn. is used in Sardinia to make cups, wooden

Fig.1 Basket made with *A. mauritanicus*Fig.2 *A. donax* and *O. europaea*

Fig.3 Horizontal handloom for broom



Fig.4 Vertical handloom

Fig.5 Basket made with *Juncus* sp.Fig. 6 *D. gnidium* used as dye

Fig. 7 Carpet dyed with plant colours

Fig. 8 *Isatis tinctoria*, a dye plant

spoons, tubs and stools. In Italy, 485 species are reported for making handicrafts and for domestic use¹⁸.

Handlooms and fibres

Two types of handlooms, a vertical handloom, typical only of Sardinia (Fig. 4) & Grigioni (Alps), and a common horizontal handloom, with variations in different regions exist in Italy¹⁹. In Calabria near Cariati (Cosenza) and Castelsilano (Crotona), horizontal handlooms are still made with *Fagus sylvatica* Linn. wood¹⁸. The same handlooms were made in Marche region with *Quercus pubescens* Willd. wood²⁰. The Museo Nazionale Arti e Tradizioni Popolari contains a handloom made with *Castanea sativa* Mill. and *Abies* sp. wood. The typical fibre of broom (*Spartium junceum* Linn.) is interwoven still today (Fig. 3) only in a few places in

Calabria, e.g. near Serrastretta (Catanzaro) and Riace (Reggio Calabria), according to an ancient use of the Graecanic area of this region²¹. A Museum containing artefacts made with broom can be found in a small village in Basilicata, S. Paolo Albanese, (*Museo della cultura arbereshë*).

Plant dyes

About 143 plant species are used as folk dye in Italy¹⁸. Dye plants were used in the past in some typical centres for the production of clothes and carpets, particularly in Pescocostanzo and Scanno (Abruzzo), S. Giovanni in Fiore and Longobucco (Calabria), Nule (Sardinia) (Fig. 7). In the latter village, dye plant uses are still practised today. In Nule, *Rhamnus alaternus* Linn. bark provides the brown colour, *Rubia peregrina* Linn. root the ancient pink, the stem and leaves of *Euphorbia characias*

Linn. provide white colour, and the aerial part of *Daphne gnidium* (Fig. 6) dyes provide yellow or yellow-green colour²². *Daphne gnidium* Linn. is the most important dye species in Sardinia; black, white and other colours are obtained from this herb with various procedures, also by adding alum or lime. In other villages of Sardinia, *Carthamus tinctorius* Linn. and *Crocus sativus* Linn. are/were employed to dye yellow, *Alkanna tinctoria* Tausch. and *Cynomorium coccineum* Descourt. for red, *Alnus glutinosa* (Linn.) Gaertn. bark or root for black, *Chrozophora tinctoria* (Linn.) A. Juss. for blue colours. *Salix atrocinerea* Brot., a species growing only in Sardinia, is still used to dye red. Herbs, barks and roots are boiled in cauldrons, sometimes together with cinder^{7,8}. In several areas of Abruzzo and southern Italy, wild *Isatis tinctoria* Linn. (Fig. 8), one of the most important dye plants of the past, collected or cultivated since Roman' times (flowers dye yellow, leaves dye pastel green) is found. In Apulia, clothes were dyed red with *Prunus cerasus* Linn. fruits ripened in alcohol, and yellow with the aerial parts of *Thapsia garganica* Linn.; colours were then fixed with salt²³.

Musical instruments

Among the ancient wind-instruments, the *launeddas*, a kind of flutes in reed (*Arundo* sp.), is still made now and played in Sardinia. These instruments were already used since many centuries before Christ by the Etruscans. The use of *Picea excelsa* Link. = *P. abies* Karst. wood, gathered in Trentino in order to make harmonic boards for violins (among the famous instruments, the *Stradivari* from Cremona) is well known^{8,16}.

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