



UNIVERSITÀ
DEGLI STUDI
DI PADOVA

OBSEX - Objects of Pleasure. The Contribute of Anthropological Material Culture to the Emergence of Sexual Science (1870-1940).

OBSEX explores the crucial, yet overlooked, role that anthropological material culture played in the emergence of sexual science. I argue that, from its outset (1870-1940), Western research on sexual behaviours was not just medical, but that anthropological investigation had a crucial role in making pleasure and desires key interests in the production of scientific knowledge on sexuality. In this way, OBSEX questions Michel Foucault's dichotomy between an 'Oriental' Ars Erotica and a Western Scientia Sexualis by demonstrating that, European scientific knowledge on sexuality was not just focused on pathology, but it was comprised of discourses addressed to pleasure. During OBSEX, I will complement my background in cultural history with new historical scientific and museological skills, crucial to understanding the role of anthropological objects in the development of sexual science. I will use Italy and Britain as main cases to trace the scientific collection, cataloguing and study of the material evidence of 'primitive' sexualities (amulets, ornaments, pleasure devices, medical instruments) by anthropologists, folklorists and museum curators, and the impact of their work on sexological theories. I will detect and deconstruct colonialist and gendered narratives embedded in sexological discourses. I will demonstrate that the study of anthropological material culture was not only used to prove the backwardness of the sexuality of the 'Other', but also served a scientific interest on common human features, such as the pursuit of pleasure. In this way, I will be able to show how the study of objects embedding the sexuality of the 'primitive' Other had a crucial role in the development of European sexual knowledge and was used as a mirror to read 'civilised' sexuality. Showing that from its outset sexual science considered pleasure and desire as constitutive elements of being human, OBSEX will place pleasure at the core of today European debate on sexual health rights.

UNIPD Supervisor: Carlotta Sorba

MSCA Fellow: Francesca Campani

Department: Historical And Geographic Sciences And The Ancient World

Coordinator: Università degli Studi di Padova (Italy)

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