

PHOTO GALLERY

Prisoners' objects: The collection of the International Red Cross and Red Crescent Museum

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The International Red Cross and Red Crescent Museum has a unique collection of prisoners' objects – items made by conflict-related detainees and given to International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) delegates who, in keeping with the ICRC's mandate under the Geneva Conventions, were visiting the prisons.

The collection has a dedicated room in

International Red Cross and Red Crescent Museum

The International Red Cross and Red Crescent Museum first opened in 1988. It underwent a significant renovation from 2011 to 2013, and subsequently reopened to reveal a permanent exhibition that includes some of the objects depicted in this photo gallery, as well as temporary exhibitions related to humanitarian concerns. The museum, located in Geneva, Switzerland, is open to the public Tuesday through Sunday. For more information, visit: www.redcrossmuseum.ch.

* This photo gallery is based on extracts from the book *Prisoners' Objects*, International Red Cross and Red Crescent Museum and 5 Continents Editions, Geneva and Milan, 2017.

the “Defending Human Dignity” area of the permanent exhibition *The Humanitarian Adventure*, where it fascinates museum visitors.

It comprises more than 360 items. The oldest item dates from 1914, and the most recent from 2015. The collection serves as a reminder of the many situations of violence that have ravaged our planet over the last century – from Chile to Vietnam, Algeria to Yugoslavia, Rwanda to Afghanistan.

Made from the rudimentary materials available to prisoners, these objects illustrate the need for detainees to escape their confined environment. As one female detainee put it: “Creating something sets you free. It’s a way of expressing yourself when everything around you tends to silence you and make you forget who you are.”

Each object tells a unique story filled with emotion. But it also takes us on a journey through time and through our shared history.

The role of the object

As soon as it enters a museum, an object – whatever it may be – changes status. To put it bluntly, it goes from anonymity to celebrity. In a museum, people are intrigued by the originality of the material, surprised by the skill of execution and moved by the simplicity of the object’s form. This first glance skims the object’s surface, revealing the hand of the individual (in this case, the prisoner) who crafted it – but that individual remains in the background. Their personal story is part of a broader, shared history. In a museum, we can go beyond the link between the object and its creator and find many other connections that are broader and full of meaning. An object can thus be used to talk about a particular context, place of detention, conflict or point in history.

Knowledge of the context then leads us to a first level of understanding of the object and certain fundamental qualities found in all human beings: the need to create, and the power of the imagination. Confronted with the need to escape their confinement, prisoners use these universal qualities to demonstrate the strength of their resistance through these small acts of human dignity. In a similar way to the objects made in the trenches of the First World War, the prisoners’ objects tell us that the instinct for life prevails over the instinct for death.

Moving from the shadows into the light, the objects serve one last purpose: that of marking in our memories the conflicts of the last hundred years and their parade of victims, both yesterday and today.



Figure 1. Comb, Lebanon, 1983. Wood, 17 cm length. MICR/COL-1992-22-4. © Mauro Magliani and Barbara Piovan.

This comb was made out of wood from food storage pallets and boxes in Ansar Camp in southern Lebanon. It is decorated with scenes depicting food distribution, medical aid and visits to prisoners. Since the camp no longer exists, the images also evoke visions of a world slowly fading from memory.



Figure 2. Guitar, Mozambique, 1989. Metal from powdered milk cans, wood and rubber, 97 cm length. MICR/COL-1991-80-1. © Mauro Magliani and Barbara Piovani.

Several detainees worked together to make this guitar at Machava Prison in Mozambique's Maputo region.



Figure 3. Figurine, Timor-Leste, 1995. Shell and rope, 15.5 cm length. MICR/COL-2002-18-12. © Mauro Magliani and Barbara Piovan.

This figurine was made by a detainee who was later employed by the ICRC.



Figure 4. Statuette, Myanmar, 1999. Soap and thread, 10 cm height. MICR/COL-1999-115-1. © Mauro Magliani and Barbara Piovani.

This sculpture of a detainee squeezed inside a cell was made by Htein Lin, an artist from Myanmar who was sentenced to seven years in prison for presumed ties to the opposition. Although he had taken part in the 1988 pro-democracy movement, he was no longer politically active at the time of his arrest in 1998, having chosen to focus on his art. He was released in 2004, when the government recognized the accusations against him as unfounded. Soap was one of the few personal items permitted in Mandalay Central Prison, apart from food, clothing and a toothbrush.

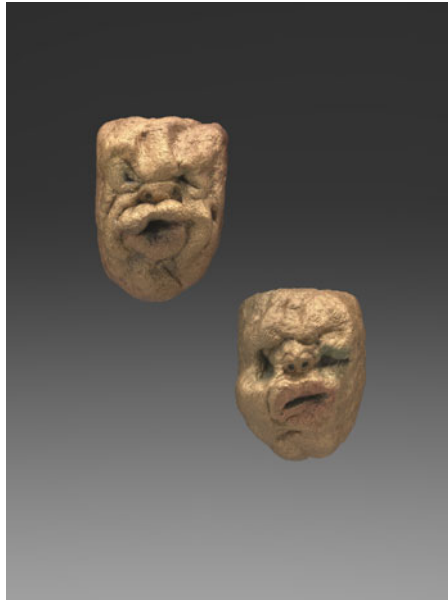


Figure 5. Pair of masks, Indonesia, 1978. Wood and paint, 9 cm height. MICR/COL-1995-49-1. © Mauro Magliani and Barbara Piovan.

These masks were made by a political prisoner and represent detainees' emotional states.



Figure 6. Eagle, Germany, 1944. Wood, 29 cm length. MICR/COL-1991-133-1. © Mauro Magliani and Barbara Piovan.

This piece was made by Soviet prisoners working at the Leweck barracks in Oldenburg-Kreyenbrük, Germany. It was traded to a guard in exchange for bread.



Figure 7. Flower bouquet, Greece, 1950. Fabric, glass and metal, 23 cm height. MICR/COL-2001-46-9. © Mauro Magliani and Barbara Piovan.

This bouquet of flowers was made by a Greek detainee.



Figure 8. Spoon, Europe, 1914–18. Wood, 15 cm length. MICR/COL-1991-100-5. © Mauro Magliani and Barbara Piovan.



Figure 9. Ciborium, Poland, 1982. Bread and cardboard, 30.5 cm height. MICR/COL-1991-98-1. © Mauro Magliani and Barbara Piovan.

The Polish detainees who made this piece were mainly workers and farmers who opposed the communist regime. Their upcoming release had already been announced while the piece was being made. The inscription, which reads “Challenge cup gifted by the detainees”, equates it to a sporting prize, awarded to the delegates in honour of the ICRC’s successful work. The eagle on the lid represents Poland and wears the crown that the communist government had removed from the national symbol in 1945.

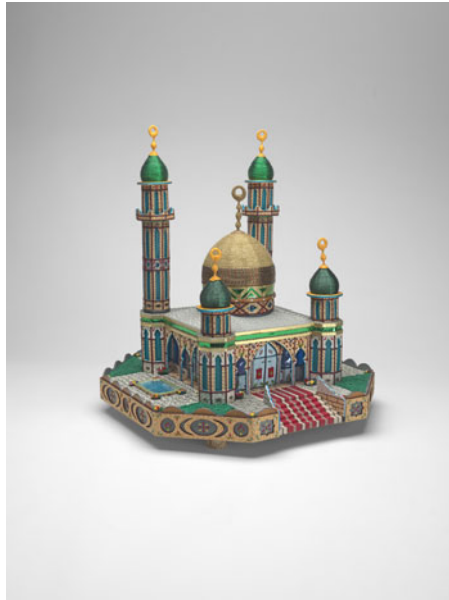


Figure 10. Mosque, Israel, c. 1999. Wood and cloth, 47 cm height. MICR/COL-1999-113-1. © Mauro Magliani and Barbara Piovan.

This miniature model of a mosque was made by Lebanese detainees in Ayalon Prison in Israel. The two taller towers can be lifted up so that the inside of the object could be examined without it being destroyed when passing through checkpoints.

Concluding remarks

Looking at these objects, a sentence from Alexander Solzhenitsyn's *The Gulag Archipelago* comes to mind: "The line dividing good and evil cuts through the heart of every human being."¹ It is hard not to think of this when one sees that behind the perfection of this ciborium made of bread lie Poland's darkest days; behind this finely crafted mosque, the Israeli–Palestinian conflict; behind this delicately sculpted soap, the dictatorship in Myanmar; behind this life-sized and functioning guitar made from boxes of powdered milk, the wars of independence and decolonialization; behind this eagle with its wings spread, the Soviet involvement in the Second World War.

These objects implicitly represent this human brutality, displaying the rich imagination of a skilled hand while reminding us of the extreme cruelty of which we are capable.

1 Alexander Solzhenitsyn, *The Gulag Archipelago 1918–1956*, Collins & Harvill Press, London, 1974, p. 17.