The library and museum of Ferdinando Vincenzo Spinelli (1691–1753), Prince of Tarsia, opened to the public in 1747 and soon became one of the most attractive Neapolitan destinations for educated travellers and “Grand Tourists”. It was a space for learning and display that defied all classification: it was more than a library, but it could not be defined as a physics cabinet of the likes of Padua, Turin, or Bologna. It was the property of one man, but it was open to the public. It was Neapolitan, but it enjoyed an international reputation. Although not a *Wunderkammer*, the display principles that governed the spatial disposition of the prince’s collections were strikingly similar to those that shaped earlier cabinets of curiosities: manuscripts, books, artworks and instruments were gathered together in its rooms as the princely collections of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. Yet, the space served as a house for the advancement of knowledge, in the manner of contemporary scientific academies in Paris, London, Bologna and other European capitals. The singularity of this space was evident to contemporaries, who referred to it variously as a library (its official name was “*Biblioteca Spinella*”) or as a museum (“*Tarsia Museum*”), and regarded it as a wonderful temple of knowledge or an outdated ostentation of luxury.

This essay investigates the symbolic significance and the cultural functions of the scientific instruments exhibited in this place of polite sociability, representation and experimentation. Its starting point is the consideration that displaying collections entails a manipulation of space that is shaped by contemporary conceptions of knowledge and of the social
functions it should serve. However, the analysis that I offer here moves beyond the notion of the museum as a space for the representation of knowledge. I show that the Tarsia Museum was also a space for cultural experimentation and self-promotion. By analysing its vicissitudes, I wish to point to the tensions arising from contrasting visions of the museum as a space of representation and as a space of knowledge production.

Architecture of Display

Palazzo Tarsia was designed by the most celebrated Neapolitan architect, Domenico Antonio Vaccaro, upon the commission of Ferdinando Vincenzo Spinelli, Prince of Tarsia.\(^1\) As Knights of Malta since the seventeenth century, and marquises of the Holy Roman Empire, the Spinelli were one of the wealthiest and most powerful families in Naples. The building of the Palazzo absorbed Spinelli for decades. He began to invest in the project in the 1730s and died before it was finished. The prince worked closely with Vaccaro in the process of designing the building and in the supervision of a constellation of artists, artisans and skilled labourers selected from among the best Naples had to offer. Ambitious as it was, Palazzo Tarsia was never completed. The data offered by architectural evidence and archival records are fragmented, yet an engraving by Antonio Baldi on Vaccaro’s design offers an extraordinary – if virtual – vision of the project in all its magnificence (Fig. 1). By a clever alteration of the perspective, the engraving exalts the sense of splendour and architectural grandeur that Spinelli wanted his palace to materialize. It presents a bird’s eye view of the Palazzo, complete with annexes, gardens and decorations, most of which were still to be built at the time of publication (1737). Vaccaro’s print was an exquisite manifesto of the prince’s political and cultural ambitions. It is no accident that Spinelli commissioned it from Vaccaro in 1735, the year of the crowning of the Bourbon King Charles. Until then, Naples had been a province under the viceroys, with no king

\(^1\) Several recent works have discussed Palazzo Tarsia from the perspective of the history of art, history of architecture and the history of libraries, but they have only quickly mentioned Spinelli’s collection of scientific instruments: Vincenzo Rizzo, Ferdinando Spinelli di Tarsia. Un principe napoletano di respiro europeo (1685–1753), Aversa, 1997; Elena Manzo, La merveille dei principi Spinelli di Tarsia: Architettura e artificio a Pontecorvo, Naples, 1997; Vincenzo Trombetta, Storia e cultura delle biblioteche napoletane: Librerie private, istituzioni francesi e borboniche, strutture postunitarie, Naples, 2002.