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# The Public Uses of Scientific Celebrity: Einstein's Visits to Italy, Japan and Sweden, 1921–1923

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**Abstract**
Visible scientists are a relevant resource in the context of public communication. As such, they can be appropriated by different social actors and parties, particularly when their visibility extends well beyond science and turns into all-round celebrity. The paper analyses how Einstein was enrolled and appropriated as spokesperson and celebrity in the context of his visits to Italy (1921), Japan (1922) and Sweden (1923) and related media coverage.

**Keywords:** Science communication · Visible scientists · Albert Einstein · Science in public

## Introduction

Visible scientists are a relevant resource in the context of public communication. As such, they can be appropriated by different social actors and parties, particularly when their visibility extends well beyond science and turns into all-round celebrity. Einstein was without any doubt the greatest scientific celebrity of the XXth century.

The paper analyses how Einstein was enrolled and appropriated as spokesperson and celebrity, particularly in the context of his triumphal lecture tours abroad: Italy (1921), Japan (1922) and Sweden (1923). It does not add much original historical evidence but rather builds on existing materials – in particular media coverage - to analyse how Einstein's iconic status developed, consolidated and was appropriated by different actors and for different communicative purposes.

These tours, their media coverage and their aftermaths offered a "multi-purpose" Einstein to different audiences and social actors, both in Japan and abroad. In many ways, Einstein's visits and his own celebrity became a "boundary object" that dif-

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ferent social actors could appropriate for their own purposes. This possibility of appropriation helps to explain the extraordinary — and in many respects unexpected — success of the tours. Finally, in order to better understand how Einstein and his visits could be enrolled for different purposes and within different contexts, the paper refers to the classical framework by Florian Znaniecki (1940) of "the social role of the person of knowledge".

## "Not a boxer, nor a star of silent movies": Einstein's visit to Italy in 1921

"Einstein, write newspapers, has triumphed in England. Who is Einstein? He is not a boxer, he is not a world champion of cycling, he is not a star of silent movies; he is not, in short, one of those great men in the news to whom, in this wave of materialism spreading through the world, masses turn in adoration. Einstein represents, instead, the highest expression of intellect, and if his fame today spreads from the small circle of men of science through the general public, it is because of the famous theory of relativity".

Thus *La Domenica del Corriere*, the illustrated Sunday supplement of the leading Italian newspaper *Il Corriere della Sera*, introduced Einstein to its readers on 24 July, 1921.

A few months later, on Saturday 15th October, Einstein left Berlin for a brief visit to Italy. The visit had been sparked by the initiative of Federigo Enriques, professor of mathematics at the University of Bologna, who had sent Einstein an invitation on 19 January 1921. Einstein quickly accepted the invitation, also mentioning his personal connections to Italy. "I have spent several years during my childhood in Italy and I have always remembered your country with nostalgia" he wrote, mentioning also his desire to meet some Italian colleagues whose work he greatly admired, including Enriques himself. Einstein knew the German translation of his book *Problemi della Scienza*. During their correspondence, Einstein wrote that he would give his lectures in Italian.

A few months before the visit, Einstein was elected as "corresponding member" of Italian most prestigious scientific academy, the Accademia dei Lincei. He expressed gratitude for the election, "not just as a sign of esteem and benevolence towards my person, but also as a happy signal of the reestablishment of friendly relationships among scholars and the scientific organizations of different States, in the form in which they existed to the benefit of science, before the political catastrophe of 1914" (Linguerri and Simili 2008: 158).

Einstein arrived in Verona, Italy, on Monday 17 October, travelling from Innsbruck with his son Hans Albert. The following day they travelled to Florence, where they spent three days together with Einstein's sister Maja, who lived near there.

On Friday, 21 October, Einstein and his son arrived in Bologna. Einstein gave three lectures in Bologna on 22, 24 and 26 October. The Italian daily press followed day by day Einstein's visit. The leading newspaper, *Il Corriere della Sera*, published a series of articles signed by the chief science writer, Alessandro Clerici (aka "Dott. Ry"), written with the explicit aim of making the theory of general relativity more accessible to general educated readers. Einstein's transversal appeal and ability to fascinate different audiences beyond the specialists is often emphasized in the reports.

"The hall was packed not just with scientists from every corner of Italy, but also students from all faculties, humble artisans, factory workers. The people deeply moved stood by Einstein as he passed, following him in long columns as to express their gratitude for having chosen Bologna for a first contact with Italy, after so many years of absence" (Enriques in Bergianti 2021).

Reports also often emphasized Einstein's appreciation of Italian artistic and cultural heritage.

"Walking with him on the streets of Bologna, we noticed that he had a fine taste for art, that he could distinguish ugliness from beauty. His gaze touched on small ancient monuments, hidden, and of each one he was able to understand style and appreciate beauty" (Linguerri and Simili 2008: 192).

Einstein's passion for music and his playing of the violin were also frequently recalled.

"There is, in fact, a form of pure beauty in which he is particularly fond of: music (he is also a good violin player) but it is also true that since Pitagoras, music is considered to be the art form that has the most profound affinity with numbers" (Clerici 1921: 2).

Reporting on the great success of Einstein's first lecture, *Il Corriere della Sera* made again a comparison with celebrities in other domains.

"The appearance of Albert Einstein as lecturer in front of the learned Bolognese audience has been similar to a star of *belcanto* on an opera stage. The curiosity for the figure of the brave theorist, both among scholars and among those who want to be able to say on every occasion: 'I was there', was so high that, at some point, it became evident that the main lecture hall of the Archiginnasio would be insufficient, and it was necessary to move to the civic library lecture hall" (*Corriere della Sera*, 23 October).

Beauty, connection and similarities with other arts (figurative arts, music), the imagery of genius so vivid that it can be detected from the face and appearance: these are some of the leading discursive frames used by the media and contemporary commentators to describe and make sense of Einstein's visit, as in the following report about the lectures (*Corriere della Sera*, 3 November).

"This serenity, this boyish freshness, is the magic with which he is able to keep this great public captivated, and some say, in love. It is the reason why we feel a similarity between this relentless mathematician who bears the name of a rock[1], and a poet. He has the same wings, the same thirst for infinity, the same faith in the reality of dreams - I mean of hypothesis: the same faith in the absolute of relativity".

Introducing his first lecture, and reflecting on the immense popularity of Einstein and his theories, mathematician Federigo Enriques added another layer of interpretation trying to understand the rationale of such popularity. Enriques wondered why "his abstruse theories, among the most abstruse to which human thinking can elevate, catch today the attention of the whole world, and not just mathematicians or philosophers, but the general public"? His answer is interesting.

"Having overcome this difficulty, to the point of explaining the slightest disturbances […]. Discovering the law correcting almost undetectable errors, constitutes

[1] An allusion to the German meaning of the word "stein", i.e. stone, in his family name.

the most splendid triumph of human reason! Despite all the sophisms with which we have attempted to misrepresent its meaning, this is also the real reason for the emotion inspired by Albert Einstein. *He restores our faith in reason, precisely in this dark hour in which it seems to submerge itself in the muddle of dark passions*. He invites us to turn away from the romantic dream of the ego that becomes intoxicated by the idea of mastering the universe, to turn to the contemplation of the order that the mind manages to discover outside itself, in the *wonderful work of art of nature*" (Enriques in Linguerri and Simili 2008: 97).

In a historical moment marked by turbulence and appeal to primitive impulses ("dark hour"[2]), Einstein's work is seen as restoring our trust in reason and appreciating the beauty of nature, in a sense that seems to connect both scientific enquiry and artistic sensitivity – a connection invoked several times during Einstein's Italian visit.

Einstein left Bologna on 27 October for an unplanned stop and lecture in Padova, so that he could also meet other long admired Italian colleagues, including mathematician Gregorio Ricci Curbastro. Once his Italian tour was concluded, he described it in fond words to his family. On 12 November, he wrote to his wife Elsa: "Lecturing in Bologna and Padova was difficult, but human contacts have been very pleasant, particularly with Enriques. They offered me a position in Bologna, a pity one cannot be everywhere at the same time! Incidentally, if there would not be practical doubts, I would immediately exchange Berlin with Bologna, without any hesitation" (Kormos-Buchwald et al. 2013: 344).

## The Japanese Tour: How Einstein became a global icon

On 11 November 1922, on the Japanese liner Kitanomaru, the rumour had spread. It seemed that the most famous passenger on the ship had received the most important scientific prize worldwide. On 13 November, the passenger got off at Shanghai harbour, together with his second wife Elsa.

Here, an attaché from the Swedish consulate confirmed the news. On 10 November, professor Per Olof Aurivillius, secretary general of the Royal Swedish Academy of Sciences, had sent a telegram to Albert Einstein to announce the award of the Nobel Prize in physics.

Set for a long tour of Japan, Einstein was not able to go to Stockholm to receive the prize during the ceremony. The 1922 Japanese lecture tour had an extraordinary media and public impact, with thousands of people attending his lectures and welcoming him at train stations, completing the consecration of Einstein as the first scientific global celebrity.

Einstein left Marseille on 8 October for a very long tour of almost six months that took him first to Egypt, then to the Far East, where he spent very happy months, far away from the preoccupations that plagued him in his home country. The situation in Germany was becoming increasingly worrying to him. In June two former army officers had brutally murdered his friend and Foreign Affairs Minister Walter Rathenau. While protests against his lectures and public appearances kept mounting, Einstein

[2] It remains unclear whether Enriques was referring here to the post-war aftermath, or more generally to a difficult situation in Europe.

was warned that he could be one of the next victims. In August, a newspaper had headlined "Einstein auf der Mordliste ("Einstein on the murder list") and a few weeks before he had written to Max Planck to cancel a talk. "[…] news- papers mentioned my name too often and thereby mobilized the riffraff against me. So there is no helping it besides patience and—leaving" (Kormos-Buchwald et al. 2013: 212).

On 17 November Einstein and his wife Elsa finally reached Kobe, Japan. Their six week stay was sponsored by publisher Yamamoto Sanehiko and its publishing house Kaizosha. Yamamoto had founded in 1919 the magazine *Kaizo* ("Reconstruction") and with the books he publishes he intended to support Japan's transition towards a new era, more open to contacts with the most influential Western thinkers and to the values of freedom and democracy.

It was the so-called *Taishō* period ("of great justice") of Japanese history (1912–1926). The publishing house had a huge and unexpected success with a novel denouncing the state of slums in Kobe, selling more than four million copies. In 1921, Yamamoto invited the English philosopher Bertrand Russell to Japan. During the visit, he asked Russell to name the three most influential figures internationally. "First Einstein, then Lenin. No one else", was the reported answer by the philosopher. Thus, Yamamoto sent one of his authors to Berlin to invite Einstein officially. Apart from publishing in Japanese the physicist's writings, the publisher has committed to paying an honorarium of 2,000 GBP that today would be around 130,000 Euros.

Einstein had not expected such a triumphal welcome among cheering crowds and spectacular flower decorations. The day after his arrival, he woke up and glanced outside the hotel window. He could not believe his eyes. Thousands of people had spent the night outside, silently watching over his own rest. Although it had been three years since his name had become familiar around the world, Einstein still did not fully come to terms with popularity.

On 24 December, 1919, he had written to his friend Heinrich Zangger:

"Due to the newspaper clamor about the solar eclipse, people are pestering me very much. Everyone wants an article, a talk, a photograph, etc. this business reminds one of the tale of The Emperor's New Clothes […] I am only getting more stupid with fame, which is a quite common phenomenon, you know. The disparity between what you are and what others believe, or at least, say about you, is far too great. But you have to bear it with humor" (Kormos-Buchwald et al. 2013: 198).

During the Japanese tour he seemed capable of keeping such good humour in the face of continuous and extraordinary signs of his popularity. During the tour, Einstein gave fifteen lectures: eight aimed at colleagues, six for the general public, with tickets at three yen, the equivalent of ten lunches at the time and sometimes people unable to fit in due to congestion; an improvised speech to Kyoto students that the reports of the time describe as "truly memorable", recounting for the first time the creative process leading to the development of the theories of special and general relativity (Abiko 2000).

His lecture tour made stops in Tokyo, Sendai, Nikko, Nagoya, Kyoto, Nara, Osaka, Kobe, Miyajima, Fukuoka and Moji. Einstein visited temples, shrines and gardens. The Japanese Prime Minister organised a reception for him at Akasaka Palace. At Waseda University, more than ten thousand students welcomed him chanting. The train to Sendai had to make several additional stops to allow the people waiting for

him along the railway to greet him. In Osaka, where the main city hall could officially host one thousand people, there were more than five thousand listening to his lecture.

In Tokyo his first lecture lasted more than four hours, translations included, attracting a paying audience of two-thousand and five hundred people.

Einstein kept a detailed diary of his travel, that was published only in 2018 (Rosenkranz 2018). On the day before his departure from Japan, 28 December, he gave his personal farewell to the Japanese public with an article written for the newspaper *Osaka Mainichi*. He thanked Japan for a welcome and hospitality like he had never received anywhere else, expressing admiration for the beauty of nature, of architecture, of houses.

Although he remained under the media spotlight for most of the rest of his life, Einstein himself always cherished the memories of his Japanese tour as a unique experience.

### A belated Nobel: Einstein's visit to Sweden in 1923

"Einstein talks in stifling heat before an audience of one-thousand. King present during the celebrated lecture". Thus, a headline in the Swedish newspaper *Stockholms Dagblad* summarised the eagerly awaited lecture of Einstein in the Jubileum Hall of Liseberg Amusement Park in Göteborg on Tuesday, 11 July 1923.

As mentioned already, Einstein could not attend the Nobel Prize traditional ceremony on 10 December 1922. So he was invited by Svante Arrhenius for the 17th meeting of the Skandinaviska naturforskarmötet, a conference involving approximately five hundred scientists from Scandinavia. The event took place in the context of the Göteborg Tercentennial Jubilee Exposition, marking the 300th anniversary of the founding of the city.

Einstein arrived by train via Copenhagen on 9 July. He visited the industrial exhibition, stayed at Gustaf Ekman's house (Ekman, a leading figure in the brewing industry, was taking care of the most important guests) and gave a talk to a group of physicists. On 11 July, with the Swedish King Gustaf V sitting in the front rows, he gave a popular lecture in German on "Basic ideas and problems in relativity theory", despite the fact that the Nobel had not been conferred to him for either special or general relativity.

The troubled and convoluted story of Einstein's Nobel Prize is one of the most interesting in the history of the Nobel Prize (Elzinga 2006). For more than ten years, his name had been regularly featured among the nominations sent to the Nobel Committee for Physics. But with the same regularity his nomination was discarded. This was due both to the fact that some members of the Committee struggled to understand his theories and to other reasons. The links between Swedish academics and German colleagues were very tight and in Germany the hostility by influential physicists (including Nobel laureates Philipp von Lenard and Johannes Stark) against Einstein's theories was becoming stronger and stronger, often connecting with nationalistic and antisemitic attitudes. The opposition by a member of the physics Nobel committee, ophthalmologist Allvar Gullstrand, was particularly strong. However, during the last few years, empirical confirmations of the theory of general relativity had suddenly projected Einstein on the first pages of newspapers worldwide including *The Times*

and *The New York Times*. Thus, some members of the Academy clearly understood that he was by then "more prominent than the Nobel prize itself".

Eventually, a sort of compromise was reached thanks to another member of the Committee, Carl Wilhelm Oseen. Einstein received the Nobel Prize not assigned in 1921, "for his services to Theoretical Physics, and especially for his discovery of the law of the photoelectric effect". The theory of general relativity was still a burning issue for some physicists within the Committee, so caution was needed. The prize was awarded to Einstein, the curious diploma says, "regardless of the value that, after any confirmation, could be attributed to the theories of relativity and gravity". And together with the news of the prize the Academy also recommended that he should not mention relativity in his official acceptance speech. Unnecessary recommendation, since Einstein could not attend the Nobel awarding ceremony of 1922.

Although the excitement for his theories in Sweden after 1919 had not been comparable to that in Japan and other countries, his 1923 visit was extensively covered by Swedish media. On 12 July, the newspaper *Dagens Nyheter* reported on the lecture.

"Professor Einstein was greeted both before and after his lecture with very warm applause from the audience, which numbered over a thousand. The King also spent some time conversing with him […] The silence was breathless, and when Professor Einstein, in an effort to make his lecture more concrete, made elegant gestures toward the spacious vault of the hall while speaking about different coordinate systems, or pointed to the corners and central points of the lectern to clarify his definition of simultaneity, many audience members—perhaps already overwhelmed by the complexity of the subject—stretched their necks with as if witnessing a spiritualist experiment or the materialization of spirits".

In the interviews with the Swedish press, like in Italy, the affinities between science and music were also often emphasized, and even ingrained in Einstein's own physical appearance.

"The face could be that of a musician, a poet as well as a scientist. After all, Einstein is also a passionate musician" […] "Do you find that the worlds of music and mathematics are similar?"

"Of course! *They both provide exactly the same architectural beauty pleasure*. It's hard to explain how similar they are to someone who doesn't instinctively feel it. *They are built on the same laws and it is with the same feelings that you walk through them*".

"The professor composes himself?

"No, I leave that to those who know how. I only fantasize - and only when I'm alone. Never in front of an audience"[3].

On this topic, an article in the local newspaper *Göteborgs Handels- och sjöfartstidning* interpreted the analogy between art and science in a very similar way to the Italian press, thereby adding an aspiration to spiritual elevation by citing a speech that Einstein himself gave for the 60th birthday of Max Planck.

"With Schopenhauer, I believe that one of the strongest motives that lead people to science and art is the urge to escape the beaten path with its painful crudeness and dreary monotony and to free themselves from the ever-changing own the shackles of

[3] Dagens Nyheter July 11, 1923, italics mine.

desire. It is an aspiration away from the desires of one's own self into the world of objective revelation and understanding"[4].

Internationalism of science is another topic often mentioned, also in connection with the role of Nobel Prize.

"What do you think of Swedish science?"

"I believe that one should not talk about either Swedish, German, French or English science. Science should be free from concepts of nationality. It is international".

"And the Nobel Prize? Do you think they have any significance for the development of science?"

"Not for science, but for scientists. The creation of the Nobel Prize has had the effect of social regulation. They have levelled ancient injustices. Through them the scientists have finally been able to reap profit from their work as well as the businessmen"[5].

The *Göteborgs Handels- och sjöfartstidning* also addressed quite sharply the hostility in Germany against Einstein which had reverberated initially also within Swedish academic circles.

"The attacks that were made from ultra-anti-Semitic quarters in Germany against his world of thought - Einstein is half-Jewish to the core - under the pretext that it lacked a Western designation of origin, have bounced back on the attackers themselves and revealed that kind of propaganda as represented by hatred, evil and stupidity. Even those who cannot follow Einstein in his path have, in the most appropriate way, distanced themselves from this purely personal criticism and testified to the wonderful talent that meets us in the form of Albert Einstein"[6].

## How the tours contributed to shaping Einstein's public image

Einstein's visits and lectures abroad in the early 1920 s – and particularly his long tour of Japan of 1922 – contributed to shaping his public image and celebrity[7].

Einstein was already famous worldwide since 7 November 1919, when the massive publicity about the results of Arthur Eddington's astronomical observation during a solar eclipse, confirming the predictions of Einstein's theory, had suddenly turned him and general relativity front page news. On that day, *The Times of London* "presented the greatest scientific headline in history: 'Revolution In Science'; the next day, "there was a follow-up article with the same title, with the addition 'Einstein V Newton'. This was the general public's first introduction to Einstein, and he appeared exactly as Eddington wanted to present him: a peaceful genius who repudiated all the wartime stereotypes of the militaristic German". On 10 November 1919, *The New York Times*, which had hardly ever mentioned Einstein until then, published an article with the headline "Light All Askew in the Heavens. Men of Science More or Less Agog Over Results of Eclipse Observations" (Stanley 2019).

[4] Göteborgs Handels- och sjöfartstidning July 9, 1923.

[5] Dagens Nyheter July 11, 1923.

[6] Göteborgs Handels- och sjöfartstidning July 9, 1923.

[7] See also the study by Missner (1985) on the wide, yet multifaceted reception of his visit to United States in April 1921, originally organised to raise funds to establish a Hebrew University in Jerusalem.

However, his Japanese tour was the very first (and on this scale, probably the last) time that a scientist was greeted and welcomed by such public attention and appreciation. As Japanese historian of science Kaneko Tsutomu had noted, "The Einstein boom in Japan was of an unprecedented scale, far exceeding" also "the post-World War II centering on Yukawa Hideki, Japan's first Nobel prize winner" (Kaneko 1987: 352). The Japanese visit and the following travels to North and South America undoubtedly contributed to firmly establishing him as the first and foremost international scientific celebrity. As Fahy and Lewenstein explain, when visibility extends beyond science and turns into all-round celebrity it brings under the spotlight also the private lives of scientists. Also, "celebrities help audiences make sense of the social world, as famous figures articulate and represent values and beliefs that are often implicit, supplying 'a human dimension to the public world, personifying or personalizing things that may otherwise be quite abstract'" (Fahy and Lewenstein 2021: 40).

The great scientific relevance of Einstein's contributions, however important, is not sufficient to explain such a transition. I outline below other key factors and dimensions that contributed, to a different extent, to amplify the impact and public relevance of Einstein's visits to Japan and other countries.

*The personality, charisma and physical appearance of Einstein*; his wit, his unorthodox interpretation of the standard academic role, his passion for music, and his availability to engage in conversations on different topics.

These qualities will eventually be condensed in what is likely his most famous portrait, the one where he sticks his tongue out (excerpted from a picture taken on his 72nd birthday) that has been used and printed on thousands of items worldwide, from T-shirts to posters and cups, as well as object of semiotic study (Barthes 1972). Japanese graphic artists and media were likewise fascinated by Einstein's appearance. A famous artist, Okamoto Ippei, travelled with him along the whole tour, contributing to make Einstein familiar to the Japanese public with his portraits and caricatures for the high circulation newspaper *Asahi Shimbun*. The caption to one of these portraits reads: "Albert Einstein, or the nose as a reservoir of thoughts" (Fig. 1)[8]. Either through personal contacts or through the many photos and caricatures, Einstein's personality and appearance made a great and also emotional impact, as indicated by several comments in the Japanese, Italian and Swedish press, with comments often mentioning his physical aspect, face and character. In his report about Einstein's visit, the German Ambassador to Japan Wilhelm Solf also remarked on this aspect.

There were also caricatures of Einstein in which his short pipe and his thick comb-resistant hair played a major role; those caricatures also alluded to the fact that the clothing Einstein selected to wear was not always appropriate to the occasion at hand (Solf in Glick 1988: 97–98).

[8] It should be noted that the Japanese public at the time had limited exposure to Westerners. Einstein may have been perceived as the first widely recognized Westerner to receive significant public attention in Japan. I am grateful for this observation to an anonymous reviewer.


**Fig. 1** Okamoto Ippei, "Albert Einstein or the nose as a reservoir of thoughts", caricature on Japanese newspaper Asahi Shimbun (1922 AIP Emilio Segrè Visual Archives https://repository.aip.org/islandora/object/nbla%3A292971).

In February 1923, the Japanese literary magazine *Shinshōsetsu* ("New Novels") published the results of a survey conducted on thirty-seven intellectuals (scientists, writers) about Einstein's visit. Some of the responses are particularly interesting.

"It is perfectly natural that such a theory was born from such a person. Lately when I look at the clear starry sky at night I find myself thinking of the Professor's character and mental attitude […]"

"I had the impression that scientists are narrow-minded, restless and like a sneak thief waiting for an empty chair, so the great and noble light in his eyes was an incredible wonder to me. His gentle attitude of total absorption in his research almost moved me to tears" (Kaneko 1987: 352).

Einstein's physical appearance was a recurring theme in many media reports and personal memoirs also in Sweden and Italy. Federigo Enriques sent his young daughter Adriana to the station to welcome Einstein upon his arrival.

"Under the Bologna station's shelter [..] we were waiting for the train. How will we recognize him? [..] I was wandering here and there, lost and anxious. But when from a third-class car a tall gentleman with an imposing look, the black hat, hair long until ears, we did not have any doubt. The three of us, making our way through the crowd, rushed to the gentleman. It was him, it could not be other than him, Alberto [sic] Einstein. We had not even seen him in photographs; still, we would have recognized him among thousands of travellers. The mark of genius seemed to be written on his forehead" (Enriques 1955: 14).

His portrait in the *Dagens Nyheter* of 11 July 1923 is almost ecstatic.

"Just seeing the man is an experience in itself. His face could just as well belong to a musician or a poet as to a scientist. After all, Einstein is a passionate lover of music. His radiant eyes, which seem to smile almost constantly, give his entire presence an inspired quality. His profile somewhat resembles that of Georg Brandes, though Einstein's expression is gently ironic. And what a voice the man has! Low, soft, and caressing. One might think he was reciting a poem by Heine when, in fact, he is speaking about the most intricate problems".

In the Italian newspaper *Corriere della Sera*, one of the most prestigious journalist of the time, Ugo Ojetti, dedicated a long article to one of his lectures in Bologna, titled "Einstein's face" (3 November 1921) describing "his beautiful head", "his turgid, fat, soft hands [that] escape from his sleeves that are too tight and too short; his limited, shy gestures, his slow speech, lisping and hesitant, his quick smile that is frank and jovial, enhances his boyish expression […] an almost ecstatic expression that moves one's soul".

This portrait connects, via one of its greatest and most celebrated protagonists, to a key narrative of the public iconography of visible scientists since the late XIXth century and throughout the following century. The physical aspect, starting from his face, is transfigured. The "beauty of his head" is extended to the rest of his figure, and is amalgamated with his moral qualities (education, serenity, sincerity, and boyish innocence) taking on a quality that is not only ethical but also esthetical (he is defined as "a poet") and even "ecstatic". His face "moves souls", and is compared to the figure of a King, and even of religious symbols. It is the popular narrative of the "scientist as a saint" that Einstein symbolized during the years of his global popularity and his reception of the Nobel Prize[9].

The article goes on to describe spectators "staring at a painting up there near the ceiling, of a grand, regal, Madonna and child; and beneath the Madonna was a bust, of marble perhaps, of King Vittorio Emanuele the Second. Beneath the bust, Einstein finally stood, alive, rotund and smiling […] it seemed that the Christian Madonna, looked over him benevolently from her throne that is eternal I know, but painted and therefore fleeting and relative"[10].

*The careful preparation and communicative management of the visits*, particularly in Japan.

[9] On this see Bucchi (2025) and Shapin (2008).

[10] Il Corriere della Sera, 3 November 1921.

Here the publisher Kaizosha arranged several opportunities to attract attention on the tour by the press and public opinion, promoting "competitive cooperation with central and local newspapers". Although other international visits by Einstein sparked great excitement, "Einstein's tour of Japan was the only visit that can be defined a planned media event" (Rosenkranz 2018: 69). Through a writer known for his writing about physics, Torahiko Terada, the famous physicist Nagaoka Hantaro was involved in planning the visit. Nagaoka agreed to organise Einstein's lecture series at Tokyo Imperial University. Another key figure was Japanese theoretical physicist Ishiwara Jun. Hishiwara had studied at Zurich's ETH under Einstein's supervision in 1913 before returning to Japan to become a professor. After his academic career had come to a halt due to a scandal connected with a love affair, he had started to devote most of his time to scientific journalism and popular books, particularly about relativity. In view of Einstein's visit, Ishiwara gave several public lectures on Einstein's work.

An educational movie about relativity, produced in Germany, was screened in several Japanese cities. Kaizosha published an announcement to recruit a reporter fluent in German "that could explain the differences between Einstein's relativity and Newton's gravity plainly enough for third year pupils in middle school" (Okamoto 2022). Ishiwara accompanied Einstein throughout the trip, translating most of his speeches including the "memorable" impromptu speech "How I created the theory of relativity" (Kyoto, 14 December 1922). The personal story of Ishiwara, framed in term of his decision to give up academic life for "true love" may have contributed an additional element of visibility and public interest for Japanese audiences.

The visit also attracted the attention of Japanese politics at the highest level. In a cabinet meeting, a discussion about the relativity among Japanese ministers was reported, with different views on whether the theory of general relativity was understandable to the average Japanese citizen. The special "Einstein issue" of the magazine *Kaizo* quickly sold out, and the four-volume of Einstein's collected writings in Japanese (the very first collection of his writings to be published) sold a remarkable four thousand copies. Einstein himself contributed to the special issue with an article "On the present crisis of theoretical physics" (Abiko 2000: Appendix 1) and with a preface to the second volume of the collected writings.

Another point which sparked media attention was the story of Uzumi Doi, a graduate student of Nagaoka, and his challenge to the theory of relativity, which had already been under the media spotlight. Although Nagaoka tried to avoid his direct encounter with Einstein, Einstein himself asked Nagaoka to arrange an opportunity to discuss with him, which actually happened in the context of Einstein's lecture at Tokyo Imperial University (Doi 1922; Ito 2018; Okamoto 2006; Okamoto 2022). After meeting with Einstein, Doi said that his objection to the theory had been resolved. However, later on he continued to argue against and conduct experiments to challenge the theory[11].

[11] There is no comparable or significant reference to content criticisms of general relativity in the Italian and Swedish media during Einstein's visits. Swedish newspapers only refer to general "antisemitic attacks" in Germany, see above.

*The news of the assignment of the Nobel prize* added another element of visibility to the Japanese tour and then obviously to the visit to Sweden, albeit probably not a decisive one.

Einstein had indeed received hints from Svante Arrhenius, a member of the Royal Swedish Academy, already in mid-September, and had even been advised by Max von Laue not to travel to Japan in order to be able to collect the prize in Stockholm. He replied to Arrhenius that he had already accepted to travel to Japan and at this stage could not postpone the visit. However, as the editor of his travel diary remarks, "Einstein made no note of the Nobel Prize award in his diary" (Kormos-Buchwald et al. 2013: IX). As some members of the Royal Academy of Sciences had understood, however, the "transfer of prestige" that usually accompanies the Nobel award, creating a halo around the laureate, in this case went in the opposite way, from the laureate to the prize: particularly in Japan, according to Law, it was Einstein popularity to help make the Nobel prize more familiar, and not vice versa (Low 2001). This process is not uncommon, particularly in the early years of the Nobel Prize, when the reputation and popularity of the prize were not yet established. Examples of laureates who contributed with their own popularity to the visibility of the prize with their own popularity include the first ever physics laureate Wilhelm Röntgen (1901, well known to the media for his X-ray discovery since late 1896), Marie Curie (physics 1903; chemistry 1911) and Guglielmo Marconi (physics, 1909)[12].

*The high expectation for Einstein's visit also has to be read in the specific historical and cultural contexts.*

In Japan, it fitted in many ways into the enthusiasm for the dawning of a new era of openness and democracy. Einstein clearly represented, for Japanese audiences, a fresh wind of energy and ideas from Europe, an opportunity for scientific, cultural, social and political change and innovation. Einstein then came to symbolize "both the role of science in modern society and the spirit of international cooperation associated with it" (Sugimoto 2005: 448). When asked by a publisher of popular science magazines for a brief message, he wrote: "Science is also of political significance in promoting the international attitude". The Japanese National Federation of Students' Self-Government Associations sent him a telegram in Kyoto, "paying respect" to his anti-war position at the time of World War I. On his way back, Einstein responded to student activists and members of the Japanese Proletarian mentioning his "fear of growing militarism, and hoped that the Japanese would move towards a path of international cooperation" (Low 2001: 448). Here Einstein was not just speaking in the name of science, but also in the name of liberal values and peace.

In Sweden, the narrative of Einstein's visit matched positive expectations towards a new season of development and progress. "His presence as a symbol of a radical break with the past and a premonition of something new fit in well with the overall theme of the city's tercentennial celebrations. Here optimism, and with it, a heady belief in the power of science and technology, dominated" (Elzinga 1995: 96).[13]

[12] On this point, see Bucchi (2018). The prize to Marconi contributed to make the prize more visible in Italy, see Bucchi (2012).

[13] See also Houlz (2003).

In Italy, as mentioned, the political frame was present, although often mediated through a cultural frame: Einstein and his work were seen as a resource and appeal to reason and beauty in an age of turbulence and resurgence of wild and destructive impulses, a "dark hour".

### Using and appropriating scientific celebrity: a "multipurpose" Einstein?

In order to better understand how Einstein and his visits could be enrolled for different purposes and within different contexts, the classical framework by Florian Znaniecki of "the social role of the person of knowledge" is particularly relevant. In this study, Znaniecki identifies four main types of social roles of scientists.

A. Technological advisers
B. Sages
C. Scholars, including "discoverers of truth" and "disseminators of knowledge"
D. Creators of knowledge (Explorers), including "discoverers of facts" and "discoverers of problems"

As both Znaniecki himself and Robert K Merton remarked (Merton 1941; Znaniecki 1940), this is not a classification of persons but rather of social roles, i.e. individual persons can play different social roles.

The social role of Einstein, particularly in the context of his Japanese 1922 tour, could thus be described as that of an *explorer*, with regard to his revolutionary ideas and intuitions, and in particular as a "discoverer of problems", set to discover "new, hitherto unforeseen theoretical problems and to solve them by new theories", opposing "every kind of dogmatism" (Znaniecki 1940: 173–174). For Znaniecki, *explorers* are "individual scientists who specialize […] in doing the unexpected. They may be metaphorically termed explorers, for they are seeking in the domain of knowledge new ways leading into the unknown". The explorer thus "may be a solitary, independent individual with no interest in professional tradition or else a rebel against established intellectual authority". He/she "experiences aesthetic joy in contemplating every particular new phenomenon which his search discloses".

As we have seen, the reference to "aesthetic joy" and connections with artistic expressions came up repeatedly in the narratives about Einstein's visits, his figure and discoveries also fascinated writers and artists. For example, the famous Japanese poet Bansui Tsuchii (1871–1952) wrote a long epic poem "An dem Grossem Einstein" ("To the Great Einstein").

However, since 1919 Einstein became established and recognised as "discoverer of truth", i.e. "a person endowed with an exceptional intellectual insight, a rare capacity to elicit, by the sheer power of reason unaided by supernatural forces, truths hitherto unknown which hereafter will be immediately evident to any mind able to understand them". This trajectory is described by Znaniecki as somehow typical of great explorers that "While discovering and solving their new problems, they looked toward the future, wandered into the unknown, sought the unexpected" (182–183).

During his international tours of the early 1920s and afterwards, Einstein also took the role of "disseminator of knowledge" and "populariser", nourishing the inter-

est and curiosity of global audiences for his own theories and theoretical physics more broadly, giving several interviews and penning himself popular articles.

He was thus playing and embodying multiple social roles: *the rebellious explorer, sceptical of established knowledge* and authority as in the first part of his career, the *world acclaimed scholar* and the *populariser*.

A key perspective to analyse Einstein's visit and its impact is that of *public uses and social appropriation*[14]. Different social actors, in fact, were able to appropriate his visits and to use them for their own different purposes. German diplomacy boasted it as a sign of Germany's strength and international appreciation of its science. Japanese intellectual elites identified it as a vessel of modernisation and internationalisation of the country. Japanese scientists and universities saw in the visit an opportunity to raise their profile and visibility. Students and political activists saw in such an illustrious visitor a potential support for their own positions. The triumphal tours and their aftermaths offered, to some extent, a "multi-purpose", "Swiss-army knife" Einstein to different audiences and social actors, in Japan as well as in Italy and Sweden.

In several ways, Einstein's tours and his celebrity became what in science and technology studies is described as a "boundary object". Boundary objects (which can be physical as well as discursive elements) "have different meanings in different social worlds but their structure is common enough to make them recognizable, a means of translation" (Star and Griesemer 1989: 393)[15]. In communicative situations, including science communication, they can be thought of as pivotal discursive elements that make communication possible without necessarily requiring consensus.

Particularly during his Japanese experience, with his own celebrated figure, Einstein actually enabled communication among different social worlds: Japanese progressive politics, German diplomacy[16], Japanese science, international science, different generations of Japanese physicists, Japanese intellectual elites, writers, artists, mass media, and general audiences.

In Sweden, "it was Einstein *the muse and innovator* that was celebrated by the city of Göteborg, while the organisers of the […] scientific congress that had invited him also saw him as *an ambassador of peace*" (Elzinga 1995: 96; italics mine). Plus, the scientists at the Royal Swedish Academy of Sciences saw Einstein as a reputational resource to further glorify the Nobel Prize and restore its international prestige. The prize to him and Bohr in 1922, in fact, could also be seen as an antidote to the criticisms raised by the awarding of all prizes to German scientists after World War I in 1919. Particularly controversial had been the prize to Fritz Haber "while the sores were still dripping blood" (Friedman 2001: 113) according to the Social Democrat Party Leader Hjalmar Branting; an award described by the Swedish paper *Dagens Nyheter* as "a formal declaration of war by the neutral and above the turmoil of battle elevated Swedish science" (Widmalm 1995: 352).

[14] See Bucchi (1997) and Eglash (2004).

[15] See Bucchi (1998) for an application to science communication.

[16] According to Kaneko, "most Japanese view Einstein as the flower of German science". The German Ambassador in Tokyo, Wilhelm Solf, repeatedly emphasised in his reports "the extraordinary beneficial effect of Einstein's visit for the German cause".

Also in Italy, Einstein was seen as a carrier of peace, " in an era troubled by passions, in which the pure ideal of knowledge seems to surrender to the unchain of violence". But this role is mediated through a more distinct intellectual and philosophical meaning: Einstein becomes a "safe haven asset", so to say, "restoring our faith in reason" in a "dark hour".

Einstein himself had recognised, already in 1919, the potentially multiple and manifold ways and facets of appropriating – or distancing from – his figure and prestige, when he closed an article for *The Times* of London on an ironic note, suggesting an "application of the theory of relativity to the taste of readers":

"Today I am described in Germany as a 'German savant', and in England as a 'Swiss Jew'. Should it ever be my fate to be represented as a *bête noire*, I should, on the contrary, become a 'Swiss Jew' for the Germans and a 'German savant' for the English" (Einstein 1919).

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