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## Removed or Ignored: On the Traces of the Italian Colonial Artistic Legacy

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In a context like Italian one, dealing with the theme of uncomfortable heritage takes us first and foremost to the memory of the Fascist period. However, there is also another area closely connected to it and even less explored in that respect – Italy’s colonial past.<sup>1</sup>

If the debate on the Fascist heritage has been recently launched and is still ongoing, the discussion of Italian colonialism, on the contrary, has never been addressed. It was buried twice, erased as an inconvenient inheritance in itself and as a parenthesis partially incorporated into Fascism. In fact, it does not exist in the national conscience, does not emerge as a theme in the political, public and media debates, and is even less present in the educational system. We can say that we are facing a real

<sup>1</sup> Italy’s colonial adventure began much later compared to other European countries, as a result of the late modern national unification (1861–1870). In the liberal spirit of the Risorgimento, which finally led to the unification of the Reign of Italy, the choice of the ruling classes to maintain a non-aggressive foreign policy was decisive. In 1882, expansion began in the Red Sea, in the territories that today are part of the State of Eritrea. At first, the Reign of Italy purchased the Bay of Assab from the Italian company Rubattino, and in 1885, with the approval of England, took Massawa. The new Italian expansionist policies were supported by the crown, some sectors of the army and economical lobbyists interested in overseas expansions. Socialists, radicals and republicans who defended the ideals of liberalism were opposed to it. Even the conservative Right, concerned about the state budget, was against the colonial campaigns. The expansion advanced slowly. In 1890, the first Italian colony in Eritrea was established. In 1900, participation in an international campaign in China to stifle “the Boxer Rebellion” earned Italy the Tientsin concession. In 1908, the occupation of Somalia took place, followed by the invasion of Libya (1911), Dodecanese (Greece, 1914), Ethiopia (1936), and, finally, Albania three years later. Italy lost its colonies during World War II, and colonialism ended without the process of true decolonization.



Fare Ala, *Viva Menilicchi!* Attack against the monument to Francesco Crispi. Palermo, 2018. Photo Fare Ala

amnesia. This does not mean that the subject has not been researched, and interesting studies have not been produced in the academic field especially in architecture, as well as in artistic reflection, in the last decades. Until the 1980s, however, a pervasive silence reigned over the colonial issue.<sup>2</sup> On the other hand, international interest in Italian colonialism was quite noteworthy.<sup>3</sup>

As the architect Filippo Amara remembers, it was in 1987 that Giuliano Gresleri began his research that resulted in the monographic

<sup>2</sup> However, there were exceptions: Giorgio Rochat: *Il colonialismo italiano*. Torino: Loescher, 1973.

<sup>3</sup> See Jean-Louis Miège: *L'impérialisme colonial italien de 1870 à nos jours*. Paris: Société d'édition d'enseignement supérieur, 1968; Peter Duignan, L. H. Gann: *Colonialism in Africa 1870-1960*. 5 vols. London: Cambridge University Press, 1974.

publication *Architettura nelle colonie italiane in Africa*<sup>4</sup> (Architecture in Italian Colonies in Africa), inaugurating a new phase in academic studies.

The political climate was not favourable, and there were also practical and bureaucratic hurdles. Though useful documents related to urban history, cartographic surveys, and regulatory plans were available, there was a lack of documentary sources related to architectural achievements. In 2006, the huge documentary corpus was still “scattered in a myriad of archives”<sup>5</sup> – each with its rules on lending and digital reproduction – and it was very difficult to access it. To deal with this problem, the project “Restituiamo la Storia / Reclaiming History” (Project of Relevant National Interest – PRIN 2006) was launched. It provided a digital archive, a series of books, and a database prototype for a simplified cataloguing of documents from the colonial era. Unfortunately, the project was stopped in 2016 due to a lack of funding.

Since the early 2000s, many essays, conferences and artworks pertaining to globalization, multiculturalism, otherness and migration have been produced, but only several of them are specifically focused on the Italian colonial past,<sup>6</sup> and only in very few cases is this topic linked

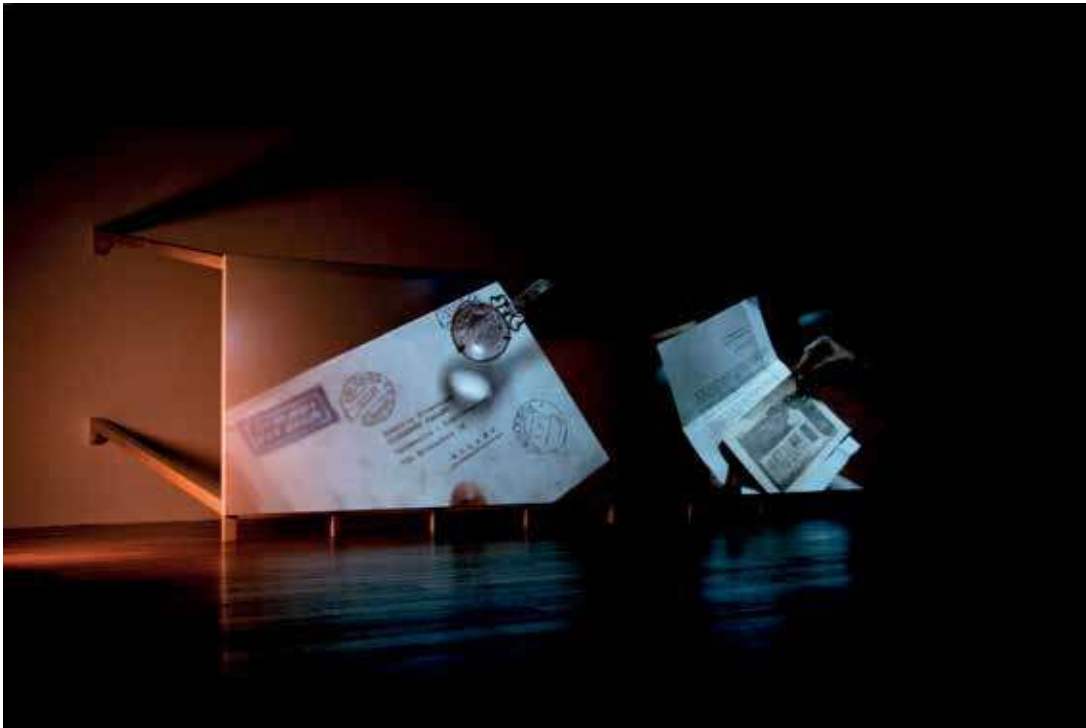
<sup>4</sup> *Architettura nelle colonie italiane in Africa*, *Rassegna* XIV, 51 (1992). See also Sandro Raffone: *Il Razionalismo dimenticato in Africa Orientale*, *Casabella* 558 (1989), 34–37.

<sup>5</sup> Susanna Bortolotto, Renzo Riboldazzi: *Urbanistica e architettura moderne alla prova della contemporaneità: Sguardi sulle città coloniali e di fondazione*. Firenze: Altralinea Edizioni, 2018, 36–40.

<sup>6</sup> See Miguel Bellino: *La critica postcoloniale. Decolonizzazione, capitalismo e cosmopolitismo nei postcolonial studies*. Roma: Meltemi, 2005; Franca Sinopoli (ed.): *Postcoloniale italiano. Tra letteratura e storia*. Roma: Novalogos, 2013; Stefania Del Monte: *Staging Memory: Myth, Symbolism and Identity in Postcolonial Italy and Libya*. Berlin: PL Academic Research, 2015.

For the postcolonial approach in Italian art history see: Teresa Macri: *Postculture*. Roma: Meltemi, 2002; Gabi Scardi (ed.): *Wherever we go. Ovunque andiamo. Arte, identità, culture in transito*. Exhibition catalogue. Milano: 5 continents, 2006; Emanuela De Cecco (ed.): *Arte-mondo: storia dell'arte, storie dell'arte*. Milano: Postmedia, 2010; Francesco Tedeschi: *Il mondo ridisegnato. Arte e geografia nella contemporaneità*. Milano: Vita e Pensiero, 2011; Roberto Pinto: *Nuove geografie artistiche: le mostre al tempo della globalizzazione*. Milano: Postmedia, 2012. Cf. also the exhibitions: *Found in Translation. Visioni Postcoloniali* (2011–2012), *Crossing Bodies – Immaginari postcoloniali* (2012), the archive project *Presente Imperfetto. Eredità coloniali e immaginari razziali contemporanei* (2014), *L'occupazione italiana della Libia. Violenza e colonialismo 1911–1943* (2018), *Resurface. Festival di sguardi postcoloniali* by Chiasma and Routes agency, Rome (2019 in this regard, see [www.routesagency.com](http://www.routesagency.com)), and *L'inarchiviabile. Radici coloniali strade decoloniali* at KunstRaum Goethe Institut, Rome (October 26, 2021 – February 28, 2022).

to the recovery of the forgotten uncomfortable historical and artistic heritage. Among them, the exhibition *Italiani brava gente. Amnesie e memorie del colonialismo italiano* (*Italians, Good People. Amnesia and Memories of Italian Colonialism* held at Fondazione VOLUME! in Rome in 2018) addressed this subject by proposing to break the dominant narrative, according to which Italian colonialism was “soft”, and started to deconstruct the distorted imagery. If the project *Viva Menellichi!* by Fare



Bridget Baker, *The Remains of the Father – Fragments of a Trilogy (Transhumance)*.  
2012. 2 channel HD projection with audio 2.4 min. Installation size variable 2.20m x 8m x 3m, wood and projection screen fabric. Courtesy of the artist



Bridget Baker, *The Remains of the Father – Fragments of a Trilogy (Transhumance)*.  
2012, film stills. 2 channel HD projection with audio 24min. Courtesy of the artist

Ala + Wu Ming 2,<sup>7</sup> presented during Manifesta 2018 in Palermo, forces us to confront the numerous traces of colonialism at home (e.g., names of streets and monuments), the South African artist Bridget Baker takes us to Asmara. Her multifaceted artwork *The Remains of the Father – Fragments of a Trilogy (Transhumance)* (2012) adopts the historical-archival approach as a strategy of resistance to oblivion, and as a link between the past and the present. What makes it interesting is the recovery of memory specifically through the architectural legacy. Her investigation of the Italian colonial past was in fact triggered by the observation of Asmara's architecture whose examples are close to the Futurist experiments.

Architecture is undoubtedly a cultural symbol and, in this particular context, a tool to measure the impact of European colonization on Africa. It is not so surprising that such an approach comes not from an Italian artist, but from someone who had a strong first-hand experience of the apartheid regime and experimented with educational models of the colonialist system in Africa.

The silence that surrounds these events in Italy tells us how problematic colonialism has been not only for the invaded nations, but also for Italians, both economically and psychologically. It concerned the collective and the private sphere, especially people's experiences of living together and establishing sentimental, social, and economic relationships with Africans. Each of us has some kind of connection with that dark page of European history. I myself keep some pictures of my grandfather in Kismayo (Somalia) during a military campaign. But my family has never talked about it.

There were several factors that caused this memory lapse in the national awareness and obstructed post-colonial studies for a long time. In the immediate post-war period, heaps of rubble dictated the agenda of

<sup>7</sup> In 2020, several civil society initiatives and artistic interventions into urban topographies were launched, suggesting that the time is finally ripe for a radical reinterpretation of Italian colonialism. See Wu Ming 2: *Una mappa per ricordare i crimini del colonialismo italiano, Internazionale*, 15.02.2021; [intern.az/1D2B](https://intern.az/1D2B) (12.01.2020). See also <https://www.localesproject.org/en/hidden-histories-2021/>

priorities, and dealing with the Fascist period and its socio-cultural legacy did not appear at the top of the list. It seemed necessary to try to mitigate Fascist Italy's responsibility for the war by exalting the courage of the partisans and by exaggerating the frightening image of Nazi Germany in order to negotiate more favourable conditions for peace. In this context, the colonial experience was left out. Though it started in the liberal era, Mussolini's policies gave, in fact, a new impetus for the colonial enterprise.

The fallacy of "Good Italy" not only was a fairy tale to be told to the world, but also was used to influence the domestic policy. Later, it also slowed down the development of a postcolonial perspective.

The idea that prevailed in the collective consciousness was that the short Italian presence in Africa could not be compared with those of other European colonial powers; furthermore, it was seen as a sort of civilising mission which had given only good things to the backward populations living in wild and unfortunate places: advanced infrastructures and the modern European style in urban planning, construction, and administrative culture. But the actual story is different. Lethal mustard gas was used in Ethiopia by the Italian air forces against the emperor Hailé Selassie's army in 1935–1936;<sup>8</sup> violence and segregation were imposed. Before hitting the Jewish population in Italy, racial laws were promulgated in Africa to protect an alleged purity of the Italian race, as their main purpose was to make any kind of hybridization between Italian settlers and African women illegal (the royal decree of April 19, 1937).

Italy abruptly lost its colonies during the war, between 1941 and 1943, although until 1960 it maintained its presence in Somalia according to the agreements with the UN, by which the AFIS – the Italian Trust Administration of Somalia – was created with the task of leading the country towards autonomy. Despite that, the slow

<sup>8</sup> It is the most controversial aspect of the Italian colonial period in Africa. It has provoked a great deal of discussions in the mid–1990s, and in 1996, the Italian government finally admitted that gas (mustard and arsine) was used in Ethiopia. See Giorgio Rochat: *Il Colonialismo italiano*. Torino: Loescher, 1973; Luigi Goglia, Fabio Grassi: *Il colonialismo italiano da Adua all'Impero*. Roma: Laterza, 1981; Angelo Del Boca: *I gas di Mussolini*. Roma: Editori Riuniti, 1996.

process of decolonization, which in other countries led intellectuals and historiographers to elaborate on the end of colonial empires, did not happen in Italy.<sup>9</sup> A clean break that had occurred politically and, therefore, in the national consciousness as well, facilitated its total removal. Moreover, unlike other countries, Italy preferred to keep the colonized as far as possible from the imperial mother country, which made the detachment clearer and more irreversible. This adversely affected academic studies too.

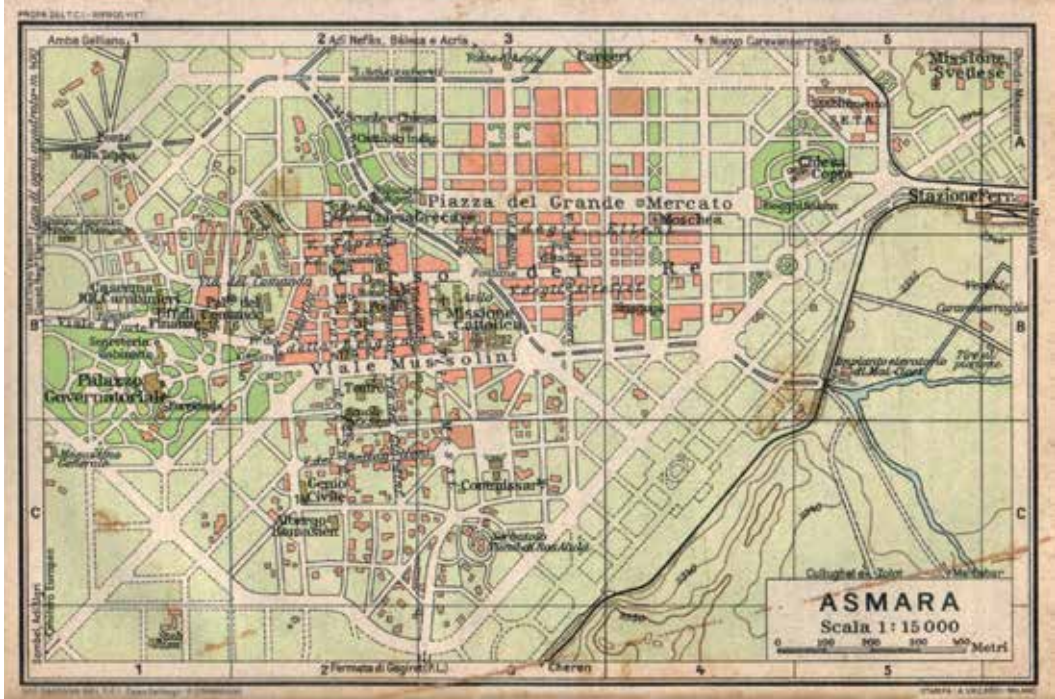
The process of historicization and metabolization of artistic production that coincided with the two decades of the Fascist regime was recently, and cautiously, reviewed, as many exhibitions and editorial initiatives show. Some of them are more problematic than others, confirming how subtle the boundary between memory and celebration, documentation and apologia can be – such as, for instance, the controversial exhibition *Mussolini ritrovato. Storia di una collezione proibita* (*Mussolini Recovered. The History of a Prohibited Collection*) held in 2009 by the private museum Magi 900 of Pieve di Cento, which exhibited the Susmel-Bargellini collection dedicated to Mussolini's iconography.<sup>10</sup>

The sixty years of the Italian occupation not only in Africa, but also in Albania and the Dodecanese (which has a separate history) seem to pale in comparison with the majority of other long-lived European colonialisms. However, they were full of traumatic events and grave consequences inside and outside Italy.

<sup>9</sup> Simonetta Fiori: L'Italia non ha mai chiesto scusa alla sua Africa, *La Repubblica*, 09.05.2019; [www.repubblica.it/robinson/2019/05/08/news/\\_l\\_italia\\_non\\_ha\\_mai\\_chiesto\\_scusa\\_alla\\_sua\\_africa\\_-225798782/](http://www.repubblica.it/robinson/2019/05/08/news/_l_italia_non_ha_mai_chiesto_scusa_alla_sua_africa_-225798782/) (01.10.2019).

<sup>10</sup> See Arrigo Petacco: *Mussolini ritrovato. Storia di una collezione proibita*. Argelato: Minerva Edizioni, 2009. This volume was published on the occasion of the exhibition at Mgi900 museum. With regard to Mussolini's iconography, see also Susanna Arangio, *L'iconografia mussoliniana. Un percorso tra rimozioni e riscoperte nelle mostre italiane dal secondo dopoguerra ad oggi*, *Pianob*, vol. 3, no. 1 (2018); Giovan Battista Guerri (ed.): *Il culto del Duce; l'arte del consenso nei busti e nelle raffigurazioni di Benito Mussolini*. Brescia: MuSa, 2016; Stephen Gundle, Christopher Duggan and Giuliana Pieri (ed.): *The Cult of the Duce*. Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2013.





*Cartina di Asmara del Touring Club Italiano* (City Map of Asmara by Italian Touring Club). 1929. Editore Vallardi, Milan. Photo by Touring Club Italiano <https://commons.wikimedia.org/w/index.php?curid=30034820>

Especially under Fascism, the arts played an important role in the spreading of the colonial project that in Mussolini's mind needed the support of the people who were not so interested in the colonial enterprise, as it would lead to founding a new Italy overseas.

A sort of referendum on “colonial literature”, proposed between January and March 1931 by the magazine *L'azione coloniale* (The Colonial Action) to some intellectuals favoured by the regime (Marinetti, Bontempelli, Panzini, Sarfatti, Tartufari, among the others), falls in this framework.<sup>11</sup> The questionnaire was clearly designed to identify a literary genre that was struggling to take shape, promoting Italian colonialism and implementing the political agenda by appealing to the

<sup>11</sup> Giovanna Tomasello: *La letteratura coloniale italiana dalle avanguardie al fascismo*. Palermo: Sellerio editore, 1984, 13–19.

collective imagination. I should mention that despite her long friendship with Mussolini, Margherita Sarfatti (a Jewish journalist, art critic, and promoter of the artistic movement Novecento) took a dissonant position, rejecting the problem of the specific colonial genre and thus refusing to prioritize the political needs to the detriment of artistic quality.<sup>12</sup>

The new demand of the regime provoked a discussion about the role of the arts, the relationship between aesthetics and politics, the government and the arts. An impressive propaganda work of promoting the colonial policy began through exhibitions and fairs, which supported the laborious efforts of visual communication carried out by journals, travel magazines<sup>13</sup> and specific cultural institutions.<sup>14</sup>

<sup>12</sup> On the occasion of the referendum (15.03.1931), Sarfatti stated in the revue *L'Azione coloniale*: “E che importa a me della ‘letteratura’ coloniale [...] Altra cosa veramente è necessaria, una sola... l’immaginazione creatrice” (*What do I care about colonial ‘literature’ [...] There is another thing that is really necessary, only one thing... the creative imagination*). (Tomasello: *La letteratura coloniale italiana*, 124–125).

<sup>13</sup> The Ente Nazionale Industrie Turistiche, founded in 1919, also promoted the Italian colonies as a tourist destination: Luigi Vittorio Bertarelli: *Guida d’Italia del Touring Club Italiano. Possedimenti e Colonie. Isole Egee, Tripolitania, Cirenaica, Eritrea, Somalia*. Milano: TCI, 1929; *Guida d’Italia della Consociazione Turistica Italiana. Africa Orientale Italiana*. Milano: TCI, 1938. Two of the main tourist magazines of the 1930s were *Le vie d’Italia* and *Lybia*.

<sup>14</sup> Some institutions were established at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century with the aim to support the economic expansion in Africa: Società Geografica of Rome, Società africana d’Italia, Club Africano of Naples, Società di Studi Geografici e Coloniali of Florence, Società di Esplorazione Commerciale of Milan and ICI – Istituto Coloniale Italiano. The last one was founded in 1906 and then became the ICF – Istituto Coloniale Fascista with propagandistic aims. There was also the Ufficio studi e propaganda (The Bureau of Studies and Propaganda) of the Ministero delle Colonie, which in 1937 changed its name to Ministero dell’Africa Italiana (abolished in 1953). The fascist regime used them not in order – or not only – to plan the actions overseas, but also to stimulate the colonial consciousness of the Italian people. In this regard, see Giancarlo Monina: *Il consenso coloniale. Le società geografiche e l’Istituto coloniale italiano (1896–1914)*. Roma: Carocci, 2002; Valeria Deplano: Educare all’Oltremare. La Società Africana d’Italia e il colonialismo fascista, *RiMe: Rivista dell’Istituto di Storia dell’Europa Mediterranea* 12 (December, 2012), 81–111. Tourist authorities such as the ENIT – Ente Nazionale Italiano per il Turismo, the CIT – Compagnia Italiana Turismo (1927), the Touring Club and the Commissariato per il turismo (1931) served the same purposes. It is further noted that in 1904 the African Museum had been established, and in 1923 Mussolini inaugurated the Italian Colonial Museum, which has now become the Italian African Museum “Ilaria Alpi” as part of the Museum of Civilizations.

Several colonial exhibitions that were organized from 1884 to 1940 in Italy revealed a progressive increase of paintings and sculptures, which were initially absent or added as mere visual aids to objects, charts and indigenous tools.<sup>15</sup>

A vast repertoire of images was diffused to accustom Italian people to Africa, emphasizing its diversity or otherwise underlining familiar elements. It thus triggered a permanent dialectic between alterity and identity, which ultimately encouraged migration to the colonies.

If initially an attempt was made to conceal the propaganda role of artistic images behind the presumed autonomy of the aesthetic sphere, the explicit educational and political purpose imposed on art became apparent. In the late 1920s, there were talks about a specific “colonial art”. The image of the “other” and the “elsewhere”, previously conveyed by the Orientalist genre<sup>16</sup> with its romantic character and exotic clichés, was not so strictly instrumental, although it was not devoid of political significance. Italian Orientalism was born before the unification of Italy and preceded colonialism. Then, hand in hand with the colonial adventure, it served as a soft tool of diffusion of the exotic imagery that accompanied the violence of occupation. The evocative quality of Orientalism gradually gave way to the cruel realism of images of documentary and descriptive nature, often full of deep-rooted stereotypes. They were captured by explorers, scientists, soldiers who practiced painting, and, later, by professionals sent to the colonies in order to document Africa for real.

The Prima Mostra d'Arte Coloniale (The First International Exhibition of Colonial Art) held in Rome in 1931 featured orientalists (from Chasseriau to Delacroix and Fromentin) and colonial artists together. The Ente Autonomo fiera campionaria di Tripoli (The Autonomous Trade Fair Agency of Tripoli), which promoted the event, explicitly

<sup>15</sup> See Nicola Labanca: *L'Africa in vetrina. Storie di musei e di esposizioni coloniali in Italia*. Treviso: Pagus, 1992; Giovanni Arena: *Visioni d'oltremare. Allestimenti e politica dell'immagine nelle esposizioni coloniali del XX secolo*. Napoli: Fioranna, 2011.

<sup>16</sup> See Edward Wadie Said: *Orientalism*. New York: Pantheon Books, 1978; Rossana Bossaglia: *Gli Orientalisti italiani. Cento anni di esotismo 1830–1940*. Venezia: Marsilio, 1998.

stated the intention to use the “persuasive” language of art in order to “propagate the colonial idea on a large scale”.<sup>17</sup> It is striking to find high-profile personalities such as Felice Casorati – one of the leading figures of Italian art of the 20<sup>th</sup> century – on the jury for the selection of artworks.

Along with the examples of traditional African crafts and artworks by local authors (“indigenous art”, such as masks, pots, etc.), Italian artists exhibited landscapes of various possessions in Libya, Eritrea and Somalia, sketches of daily life, portraits of natives and Italian political figures involved in the colonial administration. Among the participants were Lidio Ajmone, an official painter in Mogadishu until 1927, Giorgio Oprandi, an artist “specialized” in the genre, as well as other well-known artists who today are no longer associated with the “colonial genre”. The Futurists also took part in the exhibition. The exhibition catalogue included the text “Italian Futurists” by Filippo Tommaso Marinetti, who since 1929 was an *Accademico* – a member of the Italian Academy established by Mussolini in the same year, and an open supporter of the regime. He discussed the colonial genre, making the following observation:

Colonial art has produced a few masterpieces: Gauguin’s paintings, those by Matisse, and the best black sculptures. There is a conventional Africa... There is a realistic and photographic Africa. There is an important French Impressionist Africa. A synthetic Africa or a Futurist Africa do not exist... With a steely certainty of victory, the Italian pictorial Futurism today faces the challenges of a Futurist African visual expression. Recently Enrico Prampolini astonished Paris with six huge panels of African mechanical dynamism, which decorate the Futurist Pavilion of the French Colonial Exposition.<sup>18</sup>

Thus, colonialism was recognized as an important theme and the Futurists set out to interpret various issues through a modern Futurist sensibility.

The aim to promote authentic colonial art, which inspired the first International Exhibition of Colonial Art, was strengthened in its next

<sup>17</sup> Roberto Papini: *Prima Mostra Internazionale d’Arte Coloniale*. Exhibition catalogue. Roma: Fratelli Palombi, 1931, 33.

<sup>18</sup> Papini: *Prima Mostra...*, 291–292.

edition organized in Naples in 1934. Some painters were sent to Libya specifically to portray the African context closely and, in general, the participation of artists “specialized in colonial art” was encouraged.

The research on several colonial exhibitions that were held since the 1880s is inspiring. The observation of the formal technical and iconographic choices of the artworks allows us to follow the process, through which the canons of representation of “the African other”, with its exotic imagery filled with clichés, were formed. This kind of research also provides a guidance on formulating a critical judgment on the quality of colonial art, which should be further investigated in this regard, as at that time, other criteria, distant from strictly cultural reasons, weighed on the judgment. Leafing through the catalogues, we come across hundreds of artworks including paintings and sculptures, many of which have disappeared, still waiting for reassessment.<sup>19</sup> The first post-war exhibition dedicated to this huge uncomfortable heritage was *Arte moderna in Italia 1915–1935* (Modern Art in Italy 1915– 1935), curated by Carlo Ludovico Ragghianti, held in 1967 at Palazzo Strozzi in Florence, concurrently with the great flood. Its intention was, above all, to remove censorship applied to the art of the Fascist period and to return to the world forgotten quality artworks, appraising them regardless of their historical-political context. About 1,500 artworks were displayed.<sup>20</sup>

At that stage, many infrastructures and buildings worthy of the Empire were constructed. The regime needed to send an unequivocal message to other powers, and at the same time, to make the features of the African context as familiar to Italians as possible. Some of the best Italian architects and urban planners of the time were called to this end. Despite this concrete purpose, in principle, Italian colonial architectural design did not have any binding stylistic indications as elsewhere. The lively debate that was going on in the homeland was echoed in the Italian colonies.

<sup>19</sup> Giuliana Tomasella: *Esporre l'Italia coloniale. Interpretazioni dell'alterità*. Roma: Il Poligrafo, 2016.

<sup>20</sup> See Carlo Ludovico Ragghianti: *Arte moderna in Italia 1915–1935*. Exhibition catalogue, Palazzo Strozzi, Florence, 26th February–28th May 1967. Firenze: Marchi e Bertolli, 1967.

The technical characteristics and the stylistic solutions adopted there were gradually related to different ideological alignments. Specific solutions were established in each colony, while respecting the principles of monumentality, modernity, and “Italianness” required by Mussolini. In the early 1930s, there was an explicit demand for “Italian colonial architecture” that would blend the local character and the Italian tradition. An intellectual debate on the subject evolved. In 1931 the *Enciclopedia Italiana* (The Italian Encyclopaedia) commissioned the outstanding architect Luigi Piccinato to design the item “edilizia coloniale” (a colonial building); in the same year, two articles by the rationalist architect Carlo Enrico Rava<sup>21</sup> published in *Domus* (one of the most important Italian architectural reviews) highlighted how colonial architecture fell among the more general issues of modern architecture and had to be approached “from the viewpoint of Rationalism”.<sup>22</sup>

In Libya, for instance, the Moorish style derived from Eclecticism and detached from the local tradition was predominant. During the transition from the liberal government to the Fascist rule, a shift occurred from Eclecticism to Classicism filled with references to the Roman Empire, especially in representational public works that had to express the Fascist power. At the same time, a new sensitivity towards the “architecture of place” was also affirmed. Some architects tried to realize a continuous evolution by grafting the principles of European architecture onto the local culture. The imprint of the Italian character was stronger where it was built *ex-nihilo*.

In general, there was an archaeological conscience and a certain awareness of the issues that called for action in pre-existing contexts.<sup>23</sup> The first theoretical debate on modern colonial architecture, which

<sup>21</sup> Brian McLaren: Carlo Enrico Rava – ‘Mediterraneità’ and the Architecture of the Colonies in Africa, *Journal of the Islamic Environmental Design Research Centre* 1–2/15–16 (1994–1995).

<sup>22</sup> See also Maurizio Rava: Dobbiamo rispettare il carattere dell’edilizia tripolina, *L’Oltremare* 11 (1929); Vittorio Santoiani: *Il Razionalismo nelle colonie italiane 1928–1943. La “nuova architettura” delle Terre d’Oltremare*, doctoral dissertation, Naples University, 2001, 102–146.

<sup>23</sup> Giuliano Gresleri, Pier Giorgio Massaretti and Stefano Zagnoni: *Architettura italiana d’oltremare 1870–1940*. Venezia: Marsilio, 1993.

developed in Libya following the numerous demolitions in the ancient centre of Tripoli due to technical and practical reasons, was related to new functions.<sup>24</sup> This situation generated a great deal of criticism in the homeland, where historians and intellectuals rallied to protect the archaeological heritage that had remained intact over the centuries. In the mid-1930s, the debate on colonial architecture and its symbolic and representational value implied the problem of the relationship between the self and the other, between the dominant and the dominated: to impose the stylistic forms of the foreign dominant culture *tout court*, or to take into account the peculiarities of the indigenous traditions? It was above all a question of identity, considering that the colonial project itself (allegedly civilizing) meant the hegemonic assertion of one culture over another, and that the respect of a local culture demanded a political-conceptual compromise even more than architectural. Artistic reasons conflicted with political opportunities.

The Italian architectural culture of the time, with all its different facets and issues, moved to Africa where it faced the questions that the places demanded. The entry of Rationalism on the African scene was perhaps the most interesting step.

Alberto Alpago Novello, Ottavio Cabiati and Guido Ferrazza, among the leading second-generation exponents of official colonial architecture representatives of the Milanese Novecento, advocated modern classicism mixing the Roman tradition and local architecture. Ferrazza was the closest to Rationalism; he was supported by the youngest architects Carlo Enrico Rava, Luigi Piccinato and Giovanni Pellegrini, who belonged to Group 7. They helped to export a model that was different from official architecture, a new version that combined European Modernism and the Italian tradition. While expressing the Italian

<sup>24</sup> To respond to the new defensive, economic and social needs, it was necessary to find new solutions in urban planning. See Maria Ida Talamona: *La Libia: un laboratorio di architettura*, *Rassegna* 51 (1992, vol. 14); Mia Fuller: *Preservation and Self-Absorption: Italian Colonization and the Walled City of Tripoli, Libya*, *The Walled Arab City in Literature, Architecture and History: The Living Medina in the Maghrib*. Ed. by Susan Slymovics. London: Routledge, 2001, 121–154.



*Cinema Impero, Asmara.*

Photo by I, Saiko, CC BY-SA 3.0, <https://commons.wikimedia.org/w/index.php?curid=46590615>

identity in Africa, the Rationalists were more inclined than others to respect the cultural and climatic characteristics of the local places, and to enter into a dialogue with local buildings and materials (especially basalt) in order to achieve a design that could create a fusion between innovative techniques and ancient legacy without renouncing effective interventions of westernization.

The questions raised in the overseas lands had the same points as those posed in the homeland. The Rationalists traced a Mediterranean root in modern European architecture and claimed the existence of a typically Mediterranean Rationalism. The principles of renewed Classicism (simplicity, basic volumes, logic) that they adopted were to some extent a result of the intellectualization of rural architecture and the exaltation of Latinitas.<sup>25</sup> In many cases, the vernacular Mediterranean

<sup>25</sup> Ibid., 377.



building and the Roman atrium house were the ideal references that helped the architects to combine two opposite needs: an architecture that took into account the specificities of places, and the need to represent the specific Italian identity. The rejection of the Moorish style, the reference to Mediterranean architecture, and the sensitivity for climatic conditions were common traits. However, individual inclinations cannot be underestimated, although within the common guidelines. Individual attitudes, such as the interpretation of Roman constructive models, often led to different outcomes.

The most important and representational buildings were usually entrusted to big architecture companies that were close to the regime, while the young Rationalists were involved in the construction of housing for civil servants, private buildings and the design of villages in rural areas. Despite certain contradictions, discontinuity in the quality of buildings and some unsolved issues, successful results both in urban and architectural works were achieved. As a proof of that success, in 2017 Asmara was declared a UNESCO World Heritage Site as “a modernist city of Africa”.<sup>26</sup> Unlike in Libya, Eritrea’s modern settlements were largely planned from scratch. The intense activities carried out discontinuously from 1893 to 1941 in Asmara qualified it as a place of profitable contamination of architectural languages.<sup>27</sup>

<sup>26</sup> *Asmara: A Modernist African City*, whc.unesco.org/en/list/1550 (01.10.2019).

<sup>27</sup> The history of the colony of Eritrea never received, in the Italian colonial studies, the attention given to other regions conquered by Italy. This neglect lasted for almost half a century, but in the late 1980s, a turnaround occurred, as Mariastella Casciato pointed out in: *Da campo militare a capitale: Asmara colonia italiana e oltre*, *Incontri* 28 (2013), 45.

In this regard see the exhibition catalogue *Architettura italiana d'oltremare 1870–1940* by Giuliano Gresleri, Pier Giorgio Massaretti and Stefano Zagnoni, also Leonardo Oriolo: *Asmara Style / Stile Asmara*. Asmara: Italian School, 1998; Edward Denison, Guan Ren and Naigzy Gebremedhin: *Asmara. Africa's Secret Modernist City*. London-New York: Merrell, 2003 – based on this book, the *Asmara Architecture Exhibition*, hosted at the German Architecture Centre in Berlin in 2006, turned the spotlight on Asmara’s extraordinary architectural richness; see [www.asmara-architecture.com](http://www.asmara-architecture.com) (01.10.2019).

See also Luigi Prisco et al. (ed.): *Asmara. Architettura e pianificazione urbana nei fondi dell'IsLAO*. Roma: Gangemi, 2008.



*Cinema Roma (ex Cinema Excelsior)*, Asmara.

1937. Photo by I, Sailko, CC BY-SA 3.0. <https://commons.wikimedia.org/w/index.php?curid=46590715>

The capital of the colony since 1899, Asmara was intended by Mussolini to become the capital of the Italian colonial empire in Africa. The urban layout divided the territory into four areas: the first one for Europeans, the second one of a mixed European and Eritrean character, the third for the indigenous population, and the fourth for industry. It was not until 1913 that the final layout was carried out according to the architect-engineer Odoardo Cavagnari's new urban plan based on an orthogonal grid with radial street patterns. Modernist architecture was grafted onto this plan afterwards.

Thus, Asmara is a human-scale city, where the urban-architectural planning inspired by modern technological aspects has achieved a balance



*Cinema Roma*, inner, (ex *Cinema Excelsior*), Asmara. 1937. Photo by Clay Gilliland from Chandler, U.S.A. - CC BY-SA 2.0, <https://commons.wikimedia.org/w/index.php?curid=61906318>

with the local vernacular culture. “Despite the colonial imprint, Asmara belongs to the Eritrean identity and its struggle for self-determination”, the Eritrean ambassador to France and UNESCO delegate, Hanna Simon, commented. From the 1930s and the 1940s, the construction of modern infrastructures as well as cinemas, bars, pharmacies, banks, churches and residential buildings gave the city a typically Italian appearance that attracted many settlers. As more than a half of its population was Italian, Asmara became the only African colonial capital with a European majority. The coexistence of different architectural idioms did not affect the general harmony of Asmara, which was even called “The Little Rome” because it looked like an Italian city: the Art Deco of the Cinema Empire joined the Liberty of the Cinema Roma, the eclecticism of the Tewahdo Orthodox Church stood alongside the neo-Romanesque style of the Cathedral of San Giuseppe, and the *littorio* style of the Governor’s



*Fiat Tagliero Building,*  
Asmara. 1938. Photo by I, Sailko,  
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*Fiat Tagliero Building*  
(inner), Asmara. 1938.  
Photo by I, Sailko, CC BY-SA 3.0.  
[https://commons.wikimedia.  
org/w/index.php?curid=46591234](https://commons.wikimedia.org/w/index.php?curid=46591234)

Palace coexisted with the Futurist style of the Fiat Tagliero service station, the most daring building in the Eritrean capital. The contemporary symbol of Asmara (and a symbol of hope), this surprising petrol station conceived in 1938 by the architect-engineer Giuseppe Pettazzi shows a particular aeronautical inspiration with the roof reminiscent of the shape of two long reinforced concrete plane wings, spreading out for sixteen meters each without any support – in Italy it would probably not have been possible to build that way because of its strict construction rules. The structure shows an evident return to Futurism and its celebration of technology, speed and war, which in architecture mostly pertained to the design stage.

Four hundred surviving buildings of historical interest, forgotten during the isolation of the country under the Ethiopian occupation, were rediscovered in the 1990s after the country became independent.



*Alfa Romeo*, Asmara. Photo by Martin Schibbye, CC BY-SA 4.0.  
<https://commons.wikimedia.org/w/index.php?curid=68939363>

Many of them need restoration, but generally Asmara “is a rare example of modernist colonial architecture and a case study of how to preserve a ‘shared heritage’”, as was recently pointed out by Francesco Bandarin, Deputy Director-General for Culture of UNESCO.<sup>28</sup>

It is quite legitimate to face the colonial past starting precisely from a critical reassessment of the artistic and architectural heritage, as we keep ignoring our debt to Africa also with regard to the imaginary and cultural codes. The only way to move forward is to encourage a historical-sociological analysis, to foster interdisciplinary and cross-border approaches and, above all, to bring this subject into the public debate.

Serena De Dominicis

### Pašalintas ar nematomas: apie Italijos kolonijinio meno palikimo pėdsakus

Šio straipsnio tikslas – atkreipti dėmesį į Italijos kolonijinę praeitį ir jos meninį paveldą, kuris ilgą laiką buvo visiškai ištrintas iš kolektyvinės atminties kaip nepatogus palikimas. Italijos kolonijinė kampanija tik iš dalies sutapo su fašistiniu režimu: faktiškai ji prasidėjo dar XIX a. pabaigoje, o baigėsi kartu su Antruoju pasauliniu karu be tikro dekolonizacijos proceso.

Ilgą laiką kolonijinės patirties klausimas beveik nebuvo keliamas nei Italijos politiniame, nei viešajame, nei žiniasklaidos diskurse, nors daugybė kolonializmo pėdsakų kasdien matomi įvairių Italijos miestų gatvėse: pastatų dekore, paminklinėje skulptūroje ir kitur. Per pastaruosius dešimtmečius atlikta keletas įdomių akademinųjų tyrimų šiuo aspektu, ypač architektūros ir meno istorijos laukuose, sukurta keletas įtaigių ir įsidėmėtinų meno kūrinių. Visa tai suteikė impulsą platesniam susidomėjimui nepatogiu kolonializmo palikimu. Straipsnyje bandoma suformuluoti, apie kokį paveldą mes kalbame, stengiasi nusakyti, koks vaidmuo kolonijinėje propagandoje teko italų dailei ir architektūrai. Remiantis pateiktais argumentais ieškoma atsakymo į klausimą, kokia šio palikimo vertė ir reikšmė šiandien?

<sup>28</sup> Francesco Bandarin, All’Asmara uno straordinario patrimonio italiano modernista, *Il Giornale dell’Arte* 384 (March 2018), [www.ilgiornaledellarte.com/articoli/2018/3/129005.html](http://www.ilgiornaledellarte.com/articoli/2018/3/129005.html); accessed (01.10.2019).