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*Lieux et milieux de savoirs :  
pour une écologie des pratiques savantes*

sous la direction de  
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Martin Vailly

Centre François Viète  
Épistémologie, histoire des sciences et des techniques  
Université de Nantes - Université de Bretagne Occidentale

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## **Bringing the Empire to the Provinces: Colonial Museums and Colonial Knowledge in Fascist Italy**

Beatrice Falcucci\*

### **Abstract**

*In Mussolini's totalitarian state the colonial collections, displaying raw materials and natural history specimens as well as ethnographic collections, were part of wider political contexts; they provided comforting ideas of supremacy and control. Through them the Empire came to be understood by people less as something "out there", and instead it came to have a palpable, material presence all over Italy. Through objects visitors were able to glean information about diverse people's culture and climates, make assumptions about their relative positions in socio-evolutionary hierarchies, and justify their own political and economic subjugation of such people. The aim of this paper is to underline the existence of a dialogue between peripheries in which the transmission of materiality between the two has been shaping the colonial consciousness of the Italian people, beyond the fall of the fascist regime.*

*Keywords: colonies, museums, italian fascism, history of museums, italian colonialism, museology, imperialism.*

### **Résumé**

*Dans l'État totalitaire de Mussolini, les collections coloniales, contenant des spécimens, de matières premières et d'histoire naturelle, ainsi que des collections ethnographiques, faisaient partie d'un contexte politique plus large. Elles fournissaient des idées réconfortantes de suprématie et de contrôle, et à travers elles, l'Empire était moins considéré comme quelque chose de « en dehors », il était même devenu une présence matérielle palpable dans toute l'Italie. Les objets permettaient aux visiteurs de glaner des informations sur la culture et les climats des populations, de formuler des hypothèses sur leurs positions relatives dans les hiérarchies socio-évolutives, et de justifier leur propre assujettissement politique et économique. L'objectif de cet article est de souligner l'existence d'un dialogue entre périphéries dans lequel la transmission de la matérialité façonne la conscience coloniale du peuple italien, au-delà de la chute du régime fasciste.*

*Mots-clés : colonies, musées, fascisme italien, histoire des musées, colonialisme italien, muséologie, impérialisme.*

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## The Rise of National Museums in Europe

The history of exhibitions has been a subject of renewed interest over the last decades, as the very notion of “exhibition” (a concept itself in constant evolution, with its virtual and digital meanings) has come to be regarded as one of the fundamental traits of modernity. In the field of European museology, debate in recent years has focused especially on museums with a heavy colonial heritage and on their decisions to return (or retain) certain artefacts (Dias, 2000; Pinna, 2011; Laely & al., 2018; Peraldi 2019).

Starting from the Renaissance period, museums in the form of *Studiolo* or *Wunderkammern* (Lugli, 1983) were to display the private collections of noblemen: “cabinets of curiosities”, as they were later described, housed paintings, books, stuffed animals hanging from the ceiling, ancient vases, statuettes and archaeological remains on the ground, smaller objects and specimens arranged on the shelves and still smaller ones in drawers (Daston & Park, 1988). In such a context, the exposition of miscellaneous objects and ornaments can be understood as a social device to establish rank in society.

The Age of Enlightenment matured new technologies of observation and statecraft and saw the flowering of the encyclopaedic spirit, as well as a growing taste for the exotic. These influences, encouraged by increasing world exploration, trade and developing industrialization, are evident in the opening of the British Museum (London, 1759) and the Louvre Museum (Paris, 1793); these were the first big national public museums, and their aim was to transmit private knowledge into the public domain (Aronsson & Elgenius, 2014). It is no coincidence that this new demand for national museums came in the wake of the Napoleonic Wars (Bergvelt & al., 2009); museums were an essential element of the “process in which nations justified the autonomy of the state on the basis of being distinctive, unique and necessitated by historical logic” (Aronsson & Elgenius, 2014, p. 2). In this context of nation building (Porciani, 2010), the western nations believed their mission was to “enlighten” those “less civilized”, both within the boundaries of the country and abroad. This was undertaken, and publicised, by museums and exhibitions, in the capital cities of metropolitan centres as well as in the extreme peripheries of the empires.

Building on existing scholarship on the display of Fascist imperialism in Rome, this article offers a new perspective on the political role of provincial museums in forging and reinforcing the colonial consciousness of Italians in the thirties.

### **Colonial Collections in Italy: Identity, Decentralization and Plurality**

In Italy the emergence of the nation-state, the colonial enterprise and the creation of a “unitarian identity” and culture in the second half of the nineteenth century are intimately bound together. Museums, along with other public institutions, were a key site in which new ways of thinking about public culture flourished.

Museums, memorial centres and other heritage institutions have traditionally relied on the use of physical artefacts to provide visitors with an experience of authenticity: the aim was (and still is) to trigger people’s imaginations, to evoke an emotional response that serves to elicit empathy and moral engagement with the historical events and actors portrayed (Gregory & Witcomb, 2007).

As Benedict Anderson has pointed out, thinking of oneself as a member of a national public — envisaged as a large “family” or “community”, but made up of thousands or millions of people most of whom one will never meet — is a particular feat of the imagination. Moreover, the possession of artefacts from other cultures was in itself important as for colonialist nations such objects were physical symbols of a capacity to gather and master beyond national borders (Anderson, 1983).

As far as Italy is concerned, Francesco Cassata and Claudio Pogliano identify the polycentrism and the mosaic nature of the new Italian nation that came into being in the last decades of the nineteenth century as its constitutive character (Cassata & Pogliano, 2011, XVI), contrasted (with poor results) by the verticalism of Quintino Sella’s failed project, which focused resources on the capital, in order to make it the scientific fulcrum of Italy, and met with the resistance of the other cultural centres (Linguerri, 2011, p. 85).

In the last years of the nineteenth century many private collections of commercial and geographical societies, such as the museum of the Società Africana d’Italia in Napoli or the collections of the Società Italiana di Esplorazione Commerciale of Milano, were displayed during exhibitions such as the Esposizione Generale di Torino in 1884, the Esposizione di Palermo in 1891, and the Manifestazione coloniale di Genova in 1895. Following the lead of the Great Exhibition at London’s Crystal Palace in 1851 — where the Koh-I-Noor diamond, symbol of the successful conquest of India, was exhibited (Dalrymple & Anand, 2017) — and the Exposition Universelle in Paris in 1867, these exhibitions celebrated trades, job opportunities, progress and territorial expansions. At the turn of the century, drawing on the exhibits and materials owned by geographical and commercial societies, missionary orders and army corps, several colonial museums were born: the

Museo della Società Africana d'Italia di Napoli, Museo Agrario Tropicale in Florence, Museo Guglielmo Massaia in Frascati. The establishment of such museums was aimed to provide vitrines of the colonies around Italy, and recollections of the Italian overseas territories appeared in many museums, including some unlikely places: small rural villages, each presented their own, different, version of the colonial empire.

Only in 1923 was the national Colonial Museum of Rome inaugurated. The Italian response to institutions such as the Congo Museum of Brussels, the Tropenmuseum of Amsterdam, the Musée d'Ethnographie du Trocadéro of Paris, however, didn't have much success among the public: the national museum closed and reopened in various new venues before closing definitively in 1937.

Nicola Labanca's *L'Africa in vetrina* explored the political conditions related to the establishment of colonial museums and collections and called for further attention to the composition of Italian collections of this nature. Despite this promising start, in the past thirty years Italian museology has largely neglected the political dynamics that characterize colonial museological science, particularly in comparison with French and English colonial museology. Addressing this gap, this paper shows the importance of studying the political dynamics that characterize Italian colonial museology and the composition and content of colonial collections and their origins.

Especially, I aim to shed light on the key role of museums in constructing the rhetoric and practices of the Empire. Exhibitions and museums were spaces where colonial knowledge was forged and transmitted through the display of the materiality of "other" peoples, which for the first time spread widely into the country's provinces. The scope of this work is to draw attention to the multiple ways colonial and imperial consciousness in Fascist Italy was created through the exhibition medium, both temporary and permanent. The Italian case bears particular attention because its structural characteristics are not based on a centralized or uniform model. Here, I offer some significant examples of how the materiality of the Empire was exhibited in a plurality of spaces, promoting a more decentralized gaze.

I begin by analysing how the great national exhibitions influenced the birth of provincial museums, and offer a brief presentation of the ultimately unsuccessful attempt to build a centralized colonial museum. The main body of the article concentrates on two relevant case studies of "peripheral" colonial collections: one linked to the army and the other to a female philanthropic figure. Consequently, I will highlight how exhibitions and museums became places in which particular technologies of representation help not only to express identities, but also to constitute them: places where knowledge was both produced and transmitted, and where the pro-

vincial public, receiving the exhibition's message, was instructed, educated, indoctrinated.

### **Exhibiting Fascism between the Myth of Rome and the New Empire: from Expositions to Museums**

With the rise of Fascism, the consolidation of the Libyan colony, and eventually, the conquest of Ethiopia and the proclamation of the Italian Empire, colonial museums developed in conjunction with other political imperatives. Although rooted in the nineteenth century culture of the great national and international exhibitions (Abbattista, 2013), the Fascist way of displaying artifacts reached levels of spectacle and historical narrative that had never been experienced before, managing to penetrate and mark the consciousness of the Italians well beyond the duration of the regime itself. Mussolini was convinced that the Fascist regime could recreate the glories of the Ancient Roman past (Falasca-Zamponi, 1998), and exhibitions and museums were used to convey this idea.

One of the first exhibitions sponsored by the regime was the *Mostra Didattica Nazionale*, held in the spring of 1925 in Florence. The *Mostra* celebrated the accomplishments of the young regime in the field of education, paying particular attention to the Gentile Reform of the Italian school system, presented as one of Fascism's first "successes". Just like the *Esposizione Nazionale di Storia della Scienza* of 1929, also held in Florence, and equally politicized (Barreca, 2012), this exhibition dedicated to education led to the creation of a museum: the *Museo Didattico Nazionale* came into being with the fervent support of prominent contemporary cultural figures, such as the pedagogue Giovanni Calò and the philosopher Giuseppe Lombardo Radice (who had worked alongside Gentile). It was based first at the Faculty of Political and Social Sciences in Via Laura and then, from the 1940s, at Palazzo Gerini (Calò, 1925, p. 97-99).

The exhibition "*Mostra Didattica Nazionale*" at Florence's Palazzo Medici-Riccardi brought together textbooks, publications, photographs, essays by students. Different types of schools and different kinds of scientific were thus displayed, with separate sections dedicated to the Italian schools abroad and in Italian Libya (Eritrea and Somalia were missing; evidently these two more ancient colonies were deemed to have nothing worth exhibiting). The greatest emphasis, however, was on the "Roman School Hall": Fascism exalted the Ancient Roman school system by placing itself in continuity with it, showing how the first public schools of the world had been established by Romans, and highlighting "The excellence of those educational methods that aimed at the achievement of the common good"



(Grozzer & Rover, 1951, p. 7).<sup>1</sup> The “Sala della Romanità” was intended to convey a decidedly solemn and monumental tone: its entrance was flanked by full size reproductions of Ancient Roman statues. Archaeology, prior to this point a niche discipline, thus suddenly came to play an intermediary role and became the foundation of the culture of the common citizen, and above all, of his identity as Italian and Fascist (Munzi, 2001, p. 58).

During the 1920s, in fact, archaeological research, traditionally seen as elite culture was adapted for public consumption, through short films, postcards and magazines. Journals whose names sounded rather highbrow and risked intimidating the public with an overly scientific tone were vulgarized and simplified, as in the case of the *Notiziario Archeologico*, which was replaced by the more popular and richly illustrated *Africa Italiana*. Of the many initiatives which sought to help the general public familiarize with such complex themes, exhibitions were exemplary (Munzi, 2001, p. 58).

A declaration made by Ferruccio Emilio Boffi, head of Giovanni Gentile’s press office from 1922 to 1924 captures the connection between education and colonization, the perceived need to teach Italians to love their overseas possessions and to propose to the people appropriate social models for them to do so:

The problem of Italian expansion is not a problem of pure schooling: it’s a problem of education [...] it is necessary to have schools that know how to educate [...] that inspires the passion of Stanley and Livingstone, of the Duca degli Abruzzi and the Duca delle Puglie. (Deplano, 2015, p. 38)<sup>2</sup>

It is precisely in this context that, in order to “educate” Italians about their civilizing mission in Africa, and enable them to fully comprehend the colonial enterprise, Fascism called upon Ancient Rome in an attempt to mould the visitor’s sense of identity.

In 1925 the Duce inaugurated the Mussolini Museum, built to protect the area of the Giove Capitolino temple and the Giardini Caffarelli; the following year the excavation work began at the Fori Imperiali. However, liberal Italy had already exhibited an appreciation of the nation’s archaeological heritage: in 1911, for example, to celebrate the fiftieth anniversary of

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<sup>1</sup> “Pecceccellenza di quei metodi educativi che miravano al conseguimento del bene comune”.

<sup>2</sup> “Il problema dell’espansione italiana non è un problema di pura istruzione sibbene un problema di educazione [...] occorre avere la scuola che sappia educare [...] la scuola che accende gli animi, che fa vibrare i cuori [...] la scuola che ispiri la passione di Stanley e di Livingstone, la passione del Duca degli Abruzzi e del Duca delle Puglie”.

the Italian Unification, an archaeological exhibition was held at the Bagni di Diocleziano, curated by Giulio Giglioli and Rodolfo Lanciani. This exhibition, together with the archaeological section of the Genoa Exposition of 1914, later formed the first nucleus of the Museo dell'Impero Romano, founded in 1927 by Giglioli himself (Scriba, 1995). The museum housed also a colonial section, with scale models and reproductions of statues and artifacts from the most famous Libyan archaeological sites.

Indeed, from 1927 onwards it is possible to trace a progressive interpenetration between the discipline of archaeology and the conceptualization of the colonies, culminating in the preparation of the Italian pavilion for the 1931 Paris Colonial Exhibition (Arena, 2011; Carli, 2015) and the annual Tripoli Fair, where since 1935, part of the Ancient Rome pavilion was assigned to the Superintendency of Tripolitania. After all, the message had been expressed very clearly already at the II Congress of Roman Studies (held in April 1930 in conjunction with the Mostra di Arte Coloniale): celebrating the Ancient Roman era had to be the supreme objective of all scientific research (Munzi, 2001, p. 49).

In 1932 the Mostra della Rivoluzione Fascista was held to celebrate the tenth anniversary of the March on Rome and Mussolini's accession to power. The exhibition lasted exactly two years at the Palazzo delle Esposizioni, from October 28th, 1932 to October 28th 1934, hosting over 2.8 million visitors: an incredible figure representing a huge public success which has never been replicated (Stone, 1993, p. 215). The exhibition was divided into thirteen sections that interpreted the history of Italy from 1914 to 1922 in a fascist key; it was therefore an overtly celebratory and propagandized version of the events of this period (figure 1). The episodes featured in the exhibition included the struggle for interventionism, the "Grande Guerra" (figure 2), the victory, the foundation of the Fasci da Combattimento, the Endeavor of Fiume, the rise of *squadrismo* during the biennium 1920-1921, and the preparation of the March on Rome. On the ground floor each room had a different theme: the hall of honour, the gallery of the "Fasci", the documentary hall of the Duce, and the fascist martyrs' shrine. The rooms on the first floor were instead dedicated to the regime's achievements, books on fascism, the Duce's autographs, and documents related "Fasci all'estero".

The intention to create a heroic and inspiring atmosphere, "a cycle of crisis, understanding and resolution" (Stone, 1993, p. 218), necessitated a laborious decoration of the rooms, and the construction of these imposing sets engaged prestigious architects, sculptors and painters such as Sironi, Funi, Prampolini. The presence of personal memorabilia, war artifacts, dioramic displays and documents related to the first "Camice Nere" (such

as the “spalletta”, part of the fence on the banks of the Arno where the fascist martyr Giovanni Berta was killed), helped create an environment that could encourage the visitor’s participation and stimulate an emotional response (for a perspective on a “martyrs’ museum”, Gruber, 2012). Emilio Gentile summarized well the nature of this type of exhibition as a “symbolic language accessible to the masses” (Gentile, 2008, p. 16).



*Figure 1 - Entrance hall of the Mostra della Rivoluzione Fascista, 1932  
(Source: Archivio Centrale dello Stato, Roma)*



Figure 2 - One of the rooms dedicated to WWI of the Mostra della Rivoluzione Fascista, 1932  
(Source: Archivio Centrale dello Stato, Roma)

In 1937 the celebrations of two thousandth anniversary of the Emperor Augustus were organized. Giulio Giglioli — who, as we have already seen, had anticipated the trend of exhibiting “romanità” — was put in charge of the Mostra with a budget of four million lire. The exhibition scheduled from September 23rd, 1937 to November 5th, 1938, would attract over 700,000 visitors (*Mostra augustea della romanità. Catalogo*, 1937).

With its eighty-one exhibition halls featuring over 3,000 objects, the exhibition painted a picture of the Roman world that was totalitarian, militarized, and hierarchical, and Augustus stood at the center of this system (Arthurs, 2012). In doing so, it had three primary aims: to cement fascist ideology and increase support for the regime by leveraging the myth of Rome; to highlight the similarities between Augustus and Mussolini, thus encouraging mass admiration of the Duce (Kallis, 2011a); and to present Italian history, from the first Roman kings up to Fascism, as a path without caesura, in a natural progression.

The exhibition represents perhaps the peak of the regime’s showmanship and interest in the aesthetic and archaeological dimension, underlining once again the close relationship between archeology and power during the Fascist period (Giuman & Parodo, 2017). The exhibition route was structured as follows: on the first floor there were twenty-five rooms that retraced the history of Rome from Romulus to Emperor Constantine, followed by rooms that instead presented the rebirth of the Roman world under Fascism. The focal point of this route was the room dedicated to Augustus, who was deified and represented as “the man of Providence”. His commitment to Rome was underlined above all with regard to the creation of the Empire, of which he was considered the father, especially for his legal and military initiatives (Scriba, 1995).

The exhibition was a wholly new museological project, as organizers sought to overcome the “sterility” of traditional museums and to create a new medium for the presentation of archaeological artefacts. The display aimed to build self-evident *lieux de mémoire* (Nora, 1989), without paying too much attention to philological aspects: Piazza Augusto Imperatore became an “other space” (Burdett, 2000) in which Mausoleum of Augustus interacted with the Ara Pacis and the surrounding modern buildings (Kallis, 2011a, p. 823).

Drawing parallels between Italy’s present and past<sup>3</sup> was a consistent concern of the regime, but it was with the conquest of Ethiopia in 1935-36

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<sup>3</sup> Since its early years, Fascism celebrated Ancient Rome, the Risorgimento, the proclamation of the 1926 as “Napoleonic year”, ancient maritime republics, etc.

and Mussolini's famous declaration from the balcony of Palazzo Venezia: "the Empire returns on the fatal hills of Rome" that the idea of the birth of a new Empire, under the aegis of another great and valiant leader, the Duce, was cemented. The clear desire to claim a compact cultural homogeneity within the Empire is accompanied in the exhibition by a unilateral and hagiographic vision of history, in which, paradoxically — and unlike the 1927 exhibition — archeology is no longer the protagonist. Any logical route was superseded by "a focus on the eternity of the Roman ideal and its presence within contemporary society" (Marcello, 2011, p. 224), in a supposedly spiritual communion between the Roman Empire and the Fascist Empire, which therefore rejected detailed scientific explanations. Archeology was nothing but a tool that embellished and documented history, and not the true center of it. For this reason many of the exhibits and statues on display were not originals, but reproductions; the curators also had the advantage of being able to set these replicas up at will, without regard for their fragility, making them even more spectacular and presenting them as part of a dramatic scenography (*Mostra augustea della romanità. Catalogo*, 1937, p. 16). The resulting aesthetic message was undoubtedly modern, even though it was launched through ancient architecture and ruins. An important section of the exhibition was also dedicated to the antiquities of Tripolitania, which participated in the exhibition with scale models and reconstructions of its most well-known archaeological sites (figure 3).

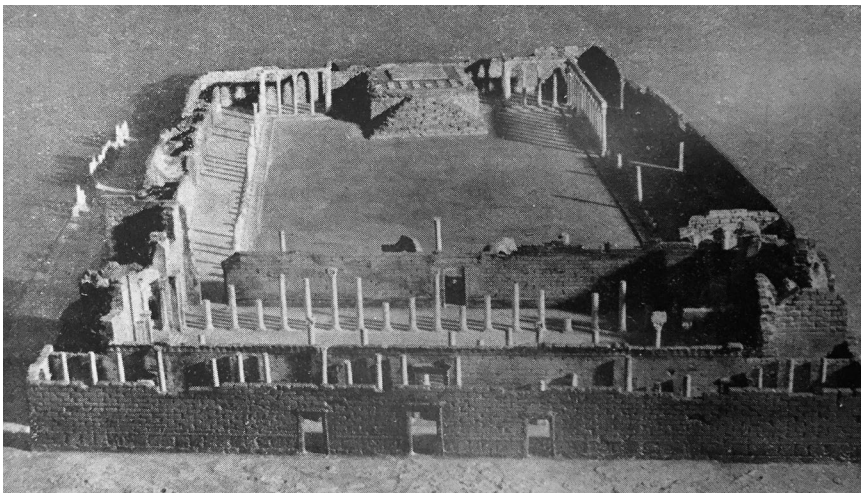


Figure 3 - A scale model of Leptis Magna's Forum  
(Source: *Catalogo, Mostra augustea della Romanità*)

Since, as Edward Said points out, “the imperial enterprise depends on the idea of having an empire” (Said, 1993 p. 11), the Italians had to be convinced of the importance of possessing an Empire, and of being worthy heirs of Rome. The success of the Augustan millennium exhibition (there were plans for a permanent section in the Museo della civiltà Romana, which should have been inaugurated in 1942), was also related to its fortuitous timing: immediately after the Fascist victory in Ethiopia. The same cannot be said of the Third Exhibition of the Fascist Revolution, which should have been held in 1942: as war raged on, every possible enthusiasm for the Empire seemed to have vanished (Fuller, 1997).

In an attempt to “export” the myth of Italy’s new Empire, the Fascist regime also participated in important events abroad (Paris 1931 and 1934, but also Budapest 1938 and the 1937 World Expo), and organized many others in Italy (the Mostra nazionale delle Bonifiche in 1932, the Mostra del Libro Coloniale in 1936, the Mostra Nazionale delle Colonie estive e dell’Assistenza all’Infanzia in 1937, the Mostra Autarchica del Minerale Italiano in 1939, as well as colonial sections featured in periodic missionary and industrial exhibitions). In all these events, whether the ostensible subject of interest was art, the Royal Navy or public health, the regimes’ aim was to highlight and celebrate the “undeniable” results obtained, the progress made in comparison with the previous Italian liberal state, and present itself as a great imperial power. And what better way to do so than a museum exclusively and explicitly dedicated to Fascist expansion overseas?

### **The Colonial Museum of Rome: An Attempt at Centralization.**

As a precious instrument of propaganda for the fascist regime, the Italian Colonial Museum was informed by the Museum Volkenkunde in Leiden, the Congo Museum in Tervuren, and the Musée d’Ethnographie Trocadero in Paris.<sup>4</sup> Although only one museum in the entire country was explicitly described as “coloniale” — the Museo Coloniale in Rome — over 90 museums spread throughout the Italian Peninsula housed colonial collections (and continue to do so). The Rome museum should not be misconstrued as the central hub of a network of colonial museums (it was actually closed for most of the thirties), rather, this was a heterogeneous group of colonial collections, spanning various Italian regions, and incorpo-

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<sup>4</sup> “Promemoria del prof. Conti Rossini”, Museo dell’Impero d’Italia, 1937. Archivio Storico del Ministero dell’Africa Italiana, Africa IV, Fondo ex Ufficio Studi Ministero dell’Africa Italiana, pacco 21, fascicolo Museo Coloniale. Miscellanea.

rated into natural history museums, army museums, medical museums and so on.

The Colonial Museum was born, at least nominally, in November 1914 as an offshoot of the Ministry of the Colonies founded two years before, on the ashes of the previous museum linked to the colonial Herbarium (1904), and with the contribution of the materials presented at the 1914 Genoa Colonial Exhibition. Due to World War I, the chaos of the postwar, and the almost complete loss of the Libyan colony at its end, the museum remained in crates piled at Palazzo Chigi, presumably suffering alterations and damage (Giglio, 1924). The museum was therefore first opened to the public only on 11 November 1923, in Palazzo della Consulta, already under Mussolini's rule (figure 4).



*Figure 4 - A room of the Museo Coloniale with a snake in the center*  
(Source: Carlo Rossetti, *Origini del Museo dell'Africa Italiana, Africa Italiana*, 1941)

The new Fascist regime needed a museum that suited its aspirations for prestige and power, especially since, at the time, Italy's international reputation was severely undermined and the image of the country was a far cry from the strong nation it aspired to portray. Even among Italian citizens the colonies were held in poor esteem, as the Colonial Minister Federzoni acknowledged at the inauguration of the Museum: "It is undeniable that



colonies are not loved by our people; they live outside the spiritual horizon of the greatest part of the Italians” (Federzoni, 1926, p. 163).<sup>5</sup> The task of the museum was therefore to engage the “sleeping” colonial consciousness of the Italians. With this purpose in mind, the activity of the trade fair was greatly encouraged and it became a veritable autonomous institution attached to the museum: the *Mostra Campionaria Permanente* (Permanent Sampling Exhibition). The *Mostra* was designed to spread knowledge of the presence of Italian colonies in fairs around the world and to store material ready for other exhibitions and propaganda in the country.

The museum expanded upon the material it had inherited from the original collections and was divided into twenty rooms, organized into sections. The first section featured scale models, reproductions, copies of statues; in the second, there were photographs and prints, paintings, albums, maps, illustrations graphics; in the third, samples of natural products (wood, sponges, ivory, minerals and leathers) and of artefacts (there were few objects related to the native population, rather “the products of some industrialists that in Tripoli have fortunately implanted a distillery and confectionery factories in Eritrea”); in the fourth, ethnographic collections, and in the final section, a selection of books which illustrated and documented the various sections of the museum (Secchi, 1924). The museum also called on the great Italian contemporary painters to create works to embellish the rooms, inviting them to travel to the colonies and produce paintings that could present the colonies to the Italian public (Tomasella, 2017) and arouse their enthusiasm.

The colony was presented through documents and treatises, telegrams, paintings, raw materials carefully placed in bottles and cases, series of ethnographic objects, weapons. As Lidchi explains, unlike when objects are presented “in situ” (Lidchi, 1997), displaying objects as “relics” in glass cases and stripping of their contexts generates more distance and obstructs emotional participation. Indeed, the colonial museum of Rome presented itself more as an “ordered warehouse” of objects than as a museum, with limited capacity to involve and engage the public.

Information and images related to the museum at Palazzo della Consulta are scarce, as it does not seem that the museum was a great success, perhaps also because of its unfortunate position; it was hidden in a courtyard of the building hosting the Ministry of Colonies, formerly the papal stables until 1870 (Secchi, 1924). The inadequacy of this arrangement was recognized, however, and the museum was moved as soon as possible, in

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<sup>5</sup> “È innegabile che da noi, le colonie non sono amate; esse vivono fuori dall’orizzonte spirituale della più grande parte degli italiani.”

1932, to Via Aldrovandi, next to the Zoological Garden, close to Villa Borghese (Giglio, 1933). Mussolini solemnly inaugurated the new exhibition on 21 October 1935, and finally the museum seemed, at least architectonically, to match expectations.

The design of the monumental entrance was influenced by the experiences of the great Fascist exhibitions, as was the organization of the halls. Nevertheless, even this exhibition was short-lived.

In addition to the entrance halls, which showed a wealth of weapons and insignia stolen from the indigenous enemy, the museum housed as many as 11,700 ethnographic finds. Musical instruments were found alongside the anthropologist Lidio Cipriani's facial casts, artefacts of various kinds collected by the Cecchi and Ruspoli expeditions, models of indigenous boats, stocks for slaves, ornaments and amulets, and the correspondence of the explorer and "pioneer" of expansion in Africa Manfredo Camperio. It was an endless series of images and objects, without any historical contextualization, in rooms adorned with drapes, banners, photographs of human "types" and landscapes, paintings, and reproductions of cave art from the Fezzan region.

The regime's museological approach — essentially, a hoarding of items which were supposedly self-explanatory — is described explicitly as such in the *Rivista delle colonie*:

A museum is does not need the arbitrary comment of a man. An exhibition, through works and documents, of events that took place. It is a lesson, as it brings us closer to the truth. (Guida, 1941)<sup>6</sup>

According to this conception the exhibit did not need any explanation or contextualization; the object could speak for itself, precisely because it mystically transcended its material form, creating a deep connection with the spectators, beyond any words or logic (figure 5).

The Museo Coloniale, renamed Museo dell'Impero d'Italia, was inaugurated a third time on 17th July 1937 (the few pictures and recording of this event are held in the Istituto Luce archives<sup>7</sup>). The reasons for this reorganization are unknown, but I would hypothesize that the arrival of new

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<sup>6</sup> "Un museo è spesso la storia, aperta all'osservazione e all'analisi, che non ha bisogno del commento arbitrario di un uomo. E una esposizione di fatti avvenuti, attraverso opere e documenti. Qualche volta però è semplicemente il cimitero dei popoli: allora allinea le memorie come in una cripta francescana e le cataloga perchè gli uomini vivi ne traggano quella parte di immortalità che è in ogni cosa creata. Nell'uno o nell'altro caso, è un ammaestramento, perchè ci avvicina alla verità."

<sup>7</sup> Giornale Luce 21/07/1937, B1132, Archivio Storico dell'Istituto Luce.

specimens and objects from the Ethiopian campaign necessitated a restructuring of the display (a room was reserved for the cannons recovered in Adwa).<sup>8</sup> A few weeks later, however, the museum closed again, perhaps in order to continue the reorganization work, and it would be closed for exactly ten years until 1947.

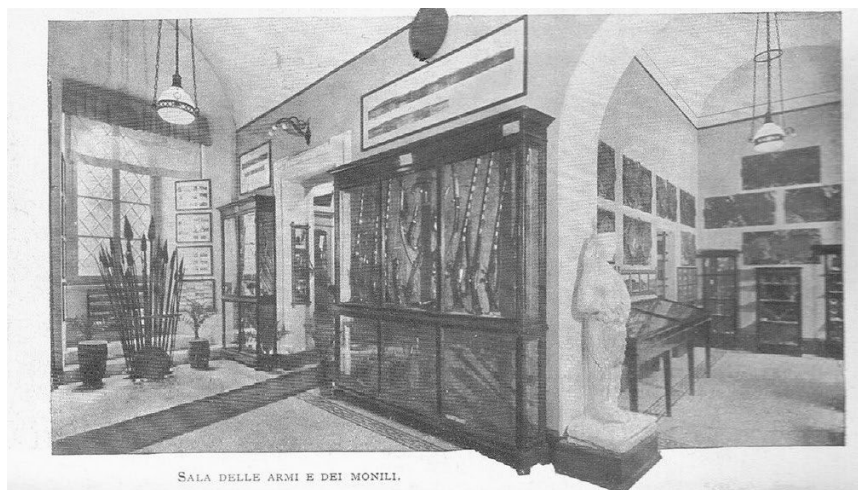


Figure 5 - The war room of the Museo Coloniale in Rome (Source: *La Lettura*, Aprile 1924)

Precisely at the peak of the propaganda drive promoting the importance of the colonies and the proclamation of the Empire, which also marked one of the moments where support for the regime<sup>9</sup> was at its strongest, the museum was paradoxically closed. In 1938, Italy's imperialist ambitions were, at home, widely celebrated, the propaganda machine was working at full force, and the colonial bureaucracy had reached bloated, juggernaut proportions with an increasing number of offices, officials, sec-

<sup>8</sup> The article *Il museo coloniale, gioiello dell'Urbe* in "Italia coloniale" of May 1937 lists the artifacts that have arrived to the museum after the African campaign. It was propaganda material, which could be useful to demonstrate "foreign support for Negus' Abyssinia" ("l'appoggio straniero all'Abissinia del Negus") and "the contribution of heroism and blood of the soldiers and black shirts" ("il contributo di eroismo e sangue dei soldati e delle camicie nere").

<sup>9</sup> When in October 1935 the League of Nations voted sanctions against Italy, even critics of the regime such as Luigi Albertini, Vittorio Emanuele Orlando, Benedetto Croce and Arturo Labriola declared their support for the government. Many volunteered to fight in Ethiopia, among them the sixty-year old Nobel Prize winner, Guglielmo Marconi. Duggan, 2013, p. 282.

tions and secretariats (Giorgi, 2012). At that time an enormous seven-storey building was planned, designed to house the former Ministero delle Colonie, renamed Ministero dell'Africa Italiana, as well as the Ufficio Studi, the Library, the Cartographic Service, the Philatelic Office, and the four Direttorati Generali (Political Affairs, Economic and Financial Affairs, Colonization and Labor, Personnel). The building should have been ready on 9th May 1941, to mark the fifth anniversary of the Empire, and maybe even the Colonial Museum was meant to be hosted there.

The Fascist regime envisaged creating a singular central colonial museum, drawing inspiration from the great museums of European capitals like Brussels and Paris. This desire is evident in the archives of provincial museums hosting colonial collections. On the one hand, these museums complained about a progressive marginalization in the 1930s and difficulties in acquiring specimens for their exhibitions, as the Museo Coloniale became the preferred recipient of new material;<sup>10</sup> on the other, such peripheral museums continued to survive, many of them boasting a well-established history and therefore greater legitimacy than the new, somewhat precarious museum in Rome (see for example the museum of the Società Africana Italiana, established in 1882 in Naples, Fenin, 1941).

The particularity of the Italian case — this extreme dispersion of collections — highlights the need to overcome the colonial binomial paradigm of centre/periphery and to investigate instead the relationship of the periphery of Empire/periphery of Italy, precisely through the study of provincial museums (from the Civic Museum of Domodossola to that of Bari). These museums have been often considered as “minor” and therefore have been rather neglected by scholars of the regime, colonial studies and museology, but they are crucial to any approach which seeks to accurately gauge the pervasiveness of Fascist ideas and to understand the regime's attempt to cultivate a colonial and imperial mentality within the Italian people.

### **Provincial Museums Exhibiting the Empire: A Domestic Colonial Network**

Despite the strong desire to centralize cultural assets, which already characterized the Legge di Tutela of 1909, and were confirmed with the so-

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<sup>10</sup> In response to the request to send some memorabilia directly to the Museo della Guerra di Rovereto, the officer replied that all the materials must necessarily converge to the Ministry of the Colonies. “Cimeli dalla guerra italo-etiopica”, Comunicazione del Comando Superiore dell'Africa Orientale, 28 Marzo 1936. Archivio Storico del Museo della Guerra di Rovereto, fascicolo Sala Coloniale.

called Legge Bottai of 1939 regulating cultural heritage — an indispensable element of the Duce's cultural policies — the regime, as we have just seen, had to settle for an unsatisfactory central colonial museum which, amid perennial reorganization, proved incapable of establishing itself as a reference point for the whole peninsula. The attempts of the Ministro delle Colonie to divert any colonial objects acquired to Rome notwithstanding, many museums expanded their collections during the second Ethiopian Campaign. For example, in 1935 the Guglielmo Massaia Museum in Frascati, established in 1909, became the Ethiopian Museum, enriching its collections (until then related almost exclusively to the Cardinal Massaia), with weapons, shields and various objects of Ethiopian craftsmanship. Among the most valuable specimens were an ornamental fan made of wood and a black lace mantilla with floral decorations belonging to Queen Taitù, ornaments belonging to the king of Kaffa's daughter and her wedding gown in silk and red velvet, and several coins. In the thirties, moreover, several museums were established in Rome with the aim to celebrate the exploits of the Royal Army, such as the Museo del Genio (1934), the Museo storico dell'Arma dei Carabinieri (1937), and the Museo dei Bersaglieri (1932), which all featured material from the colonies, in particular Ethiopia (Sema, 1992). Small recollections of the colonies appeared in many museums all over Italy such as Pinerolo (Museo "Casa del Senato"), Torre Pellice ("Museo Valdese"), Oleggio (Museo Carlo Giacomo Fanchini), Bologna (Museo di Medicina Tropicale), Bari (Museo civico) and so on. In the new century Italy's colonial collecting began to make a transition from the nineteenth century "conquest phase", in which collecting was spontaneous and usually the work of military personnel who would donate objects to a local museum and geographical society (this is how, for example, the museum of the Società di Esplorazione commerciale in Africa of Milano was born, Falcucci & Antonini, 2019). In the new century, the first proper colonial museums were established and scientific missions were founded. Local administrators knew that such institutions provided an excellent vector for colonial propaganda: the reason *istituti*, *società* and *musei coloniali* were spontaneously created in a dozen cities (Monina, 2002).

In the perspective of an analysis of the dissemination of the colonial collections in Italy, a significant and well-documented case is that of the Museo della Guerra di Rovereto. Rovereto, a small town on the extreme outskirts of rural northern Italy, in the province of Trento which had much suffered from the devastation of the First World War, hosted a War Museum in the scenic location of Castel Veneto that was inaugurated in October 1921. In 1929 General Giuseppe Antonio Malladra, a veteran officer who had participated in the battle of Adwa, as well as the conquest of Libya in

1911, and president of the museum from the previous year, decided to equip the museum with two colonial rooms (figures 6 & 7). Presented as more of a military operation than a Fascist one, the acquisition of the colonies was displayed through the ostentation of the weapons and insignia taken from the enemy, scale models of barracks and battles, and photographs depicting colonial wards.



*Figure 6 - The colonial room of the Museo della Guerra di Rovereto  
(Source: Archivio Storico del Museo della Guerra di Rovereto)*

Relying primarily on objects bequeathed by soldiers from the area who had served in the colonies, but also boasting donations from celebrated military officials, governors and colonial administrators like Rodolfo Graziani, the museum was entirely created and set up by professional soldiers; a fact that was clearly evident in the way its collections were displayed.

We have already seen how museums tried to make use of official and less official channels<sup>11</sup> to expand their collections through requests for objects directly to the Ministry of the Colonies, requests that were ignored.<sup>12</sup>

<sup>11</sup> "Oggetto: Cimeli della guerra italo-etiopica", Comando superiore A.O. Ufficio Operazioni al Direttore del Museo della Guerra di Rovereto, 27 Marzo 1936. ASMGR.



*Figure 7 - The Colonial Room of the Museo della Guerra di Rovereto  
(Source: Archivio Storico del Museo della Guerra di Rovereto)*

Coming to terms with the fact they would have to rely on personal contacts to enhance the Rovereto museum, the directors nevertheless managed to put together a very respectable collection, with objects such as the sword of honor of General Baratieri<sup>12</sup>; a famous Risorgimento patriot born in the Austro-Hungarian Tyrol with the name of Baratter and governor of the Eritrean colony, accused of having abandoned his troops in the retreat of Adwa, put on trial but then not executed. In fact, after a long period of *damnatio memoriae* in attempt to forget Italy's unpreparedness and failures in Africa, the figure of Baratieri returned to the fore during fascism, in the ranks of all those who, mistreated by the inept liberal Italian state, were now gaining instead a place among the "pioneers", to be celebrated and raised as a model for the new fascist generations.

In the museum of Rovereto the conquest of the colonies (presented as above all a military conquest) is narrated from a purely nationalistic point of view which emphasizes the continuity between the nineteenth and twen-

<sup>12</sup> "Ill.mo Signor Direttore del Museo Storico di Guerra", Comunicazione del Ministero delle Colonie, Ufficio III Museo Coloniale, 10 Dicembre 1936. ASMGR.

<sup>13</sup> "Illustrissimo signor Prosindaco", Lettera del Direttore del Museo della Guerra di Rovereto al Prosindaco della città di Rovereto, 31 Ottobre 1921. ASMGR.

tieth centuries (regardless of the caesura between the liberal state and fascism), and honours the Savoy Monarchy, the ideals (non-republican, of course) of the Risorgimento, and the sacrifice of the First World War. The conquest of the colonies is presented, together with these other turning points, as a fundamental step in the creation of the Italian state. The Army is depicted as a vehicle of conquest and state construction, an instrument of order, rationality and civilization (Baioni, 1993). The names of well-known battles, theatres of the Italian Army's heroic deeds such as Agordat and Massawa, and the names of martyrs to the conquest such as Toselli and Galliano, must have been so familiar to the visitors of the museum (27, 375 in 1926, a considerable amount for a museum in such a remote area of Italy), that the objects associated with them could be exhibited almost without any captions and complementary information, as in a shrine, in the circular room that by chance took the name of *tucul*. It seems clear that the museum was not intended to offer to the visitor a real possibility of knowledge or understanding; rather, it limited itself to presenting a surrogate form of history, exhibiting and celebrating spoils and heroes (Labanca, Rasera & Zadra, 1992, p. 137).

By skipping any logical passage or factual connection, and creating a mystical link between object and spectator, the museum proposed to inspire in visitors the same patriotic impulse that had guided the exploits of the soldiers serving in the colonies. It was a clear attempt to merge the Risorgimento, World War I, and colonial wars, in a territory that could not be further away from Africa in geographic terms and which had paid a high price during the First World War: an attempt to help the population "digest" the sacrifice of local lives that the conquest and maintenance of the colonies necessitated. In the words of Malladra himself:

a room dedicated to the colonial war that tells the visitor about all the difficulties encountered and gloriously overcome by the Italian infantrymen and Ascari to give the country a colony.<sup>14</sup>

To this end, photographs of the Empire's achievements, through its soldiers, offered tangible proof of the goodness of Italian operations in Africa. In addition to weapons and uniforms, the collection also included humble wooden objects such as headrests, chains, sandals or rudimentary locks and

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<sup>14</sup> "una sala dedicata alla guerra coloniale che dica al visitatore tutte le difficoltà incontrate e gloriosamente superate dai Fanti ed Ascari d'Italia per dare alla Patria uno sbocco coloniale." Source: "Onorevole comando del R. Corpo di Truppe Coloniali della Colonia Eritrea", Lettera del Direttore del Museo della Guerra di Rovereto, 19 Giugno 1928. ASMGR.



the *Brennero* of 2nd June 1929 proudly described it as “unique in Italy, right after the great colonial Museum at Palazzo della Consulta in Rome”.<sup>15</sup> The presentation, albeit limited, of ethnographic objects, without any contextualization, as simply rudimentary and backward, did nothing but reinforce in visitors the certainty that the Italian soldiers were operating in the right way, bringing order, civilization and progress to those populations that had been for too long “beyond history”.

A second, equally illuminating case, also located in one of the Empire’s most rural provinces, is the Maria Fioroni Colonial Museum in Legnago, in the province of Verona. Distinct from the military tone of the Trentino museum, this museum is relevant for several reasons, not least because its founder and curator was a woman, Maria Fioroni. Daughter of Enrico Fioroni, a convinced patriot who had fought alongside Garibaldi in the battle of Bezzacca, Maria had had the opportunity to study and cultivate a multiplicity of interests including archeology, ceramics, and history. She had volunteered for the Red Cross during the First World War, and kept close correspondence with the fighters (over seven thousand letters preserved in the archives of the Fioroni Foundation remain as evidence of this bond<sup>16</sup>).

Maria carried out her intense and multifaceted research in the large family palace, which from the early 1930s she slowly turned into a museum dedicated to the history of Legnago, hosting the archaeological materials and the military and Risorgimento relics she had collected. Between 1939 and 1941, to complement the “domestic” collections dedicated to the history of the Verona area, the noble family home also hosted a room containing the “colonial museum” set up by Fioroni herself, who at the time was an active supporter of the regime’s colonial policy, to the point of holding the position of provincial trustee of the Fascist Institute of Italian Africa (AFAI). Thus the museum was described by a journalist in 1942:

One of the most curious [museums] that we ever have to see. Never had a museum offered so much hospitality to zoology, natural sciences, mineralogy, numismatics, history, chronicle, seated in a single provincial olympus, causing an almost babelic mixture of curiosities. (Cenzato, 1942)<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>15</sup> “unica in Italia, dopo il grande Museo coloniale esistente nel Palazzo della Consulta di Roma”.

<sup>16</sup> Settemila lettere in un singolare museo, *Stampa sera*, 9-10 Dicembre, 1949.

<sup>17</sup> “uno dei più curiosi [musei] che si abbiano mai a vedere. Il suo palazzo è letteralmente invaso da questa documentazione [...] che si potrebbe dire universale, perchè comprende persino pezzi di caccia grossa, pelli e teste di animali esotici; va a finire nelle raccolte di decreti secolari e s’avviva persino delle memorie recentissime

Fioroni, also the secretary of the female branch of the Fascio of Legnago, firmly believed in the civilizing mission of the Italian troops engaged on the Abyssinian front, and undoubtedly suffered a certain fascination for an Africa conceived and idealized as distant and mysterious Africa, answering to the more classical canons of Orientalism (figure 8).



*Figure 8 - The Museo Coloniale Maria Fioroni*  
(Source: Archivio Storico della Fondazione Museo Maria Fioroni)

The arched rooms of her colonial museum, for example, distinguished by the Moorish style from those of the rest of the building, were designed to reproduce “the arches of the Alhambra in Seville, perhaps the best calling card of the sumptuous Arab civilization” (Girola, 1954),<sup>18</sup> which, however, had very little to do with the civilizations of the Horn of Africa. Nevertheless, we can imagine the astonishment that this type of architecture could arouse in the population of the small Veronese town,

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della guerra attuale. Mai museo mette tanto capogiro, ed esige sì immediati e pronti adattamenti dello spirito, e mai domestica sede ha offerto sì larga ospitalità alla zoologia, alla scienze naturali, alla mineralogia, alla nummismatica, alla storia, alla cronaca, assise in un unico olimpo provinciale provocando una mistura quasi babelica di curiosità”.

<sup>18</sup> “gli archi dell’Alhambra di Siviglia, forse il migliore biglietto da visita della fastosa civiltà araba”.

where perhaps few inhabitants would have questioned the fanciful transposition of Moorish Spain onto East Africa. Legnago's populace was certainly impressed by the stuffed lions, the panoplies, the drums, the shields and jewels that belonged to the Ethiopian Ras and Queens whose names had become so familiar, as they had occupied the pages of Italian newspapers for years (figure 9).

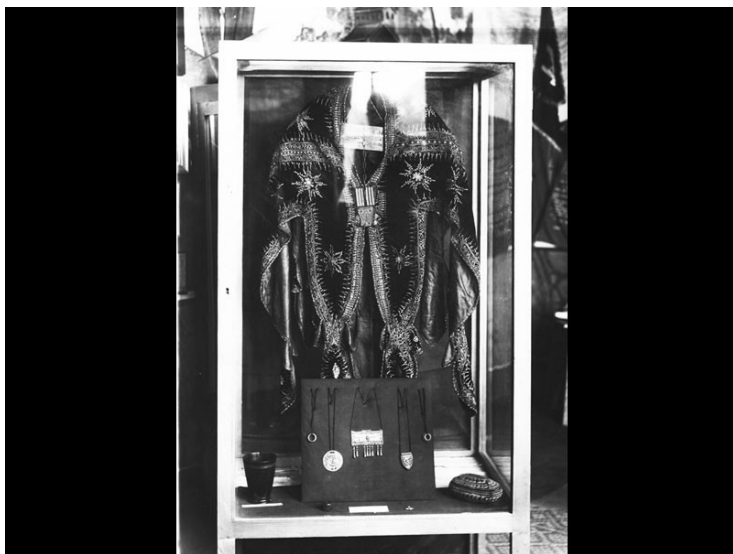


Figure 9 - The Museo Coloniale Maria Fioroni  
(Source: Archivio Storico della Fondazione Museo Maria Fioroni)

The *Gazzettino* of November 1937 wrote that

Africa cannot be loved without knowing her and cannot be known without loving her. The Legnaghese museum will lead to that love which is so necessary, for without it a people will not really be able to become a good colonizer.<sup>19</sup>

Definitely a provincial museum but not a parochial one, as it was one the reporter considered

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<sup>19</sup> “l’Africa non si può amare senza conoscerla e non si può conoscere senza amarla. Il museo legnaghese porterà a quell’amore che è tanto doveroso e necessario e senza quel quale un popolo non potrà divenire veramente un buon colonizzatore e un conservatore e potenziatore di imperi”.

At the forefront of the colonial movement. [A museum] that is admired by many and that is also known in Rome for the organic nature of its collections [...] considered among the most complete existing. The commodities collections, from the various places of the Empire, are arranged in good order and with precision. There is the first wheat harvested by our settlers in Gondar, various types of coffee from the Gimma, cotton from Harrar, Caffa, the Somali cotton from Genale and that from Tessaneî, sesame, coconut, tobacco, madreporic products of the Red Sea, skins of various animals, minerals. (F. Z, 1938)<sup>20</sup>

While the display of raw materials was not unusual (some colonial museums were created for this specific purpose, such as the Tropical Museum of the Istituto Agronomico per l'Oltremare of Florence. Falcucci, 2020), in a context of this kind it suggests a more emotional and “personal” aspect: it was a matter of convincing, through the exposition of the richness of the colonies, the population of a small town in the Veneto province — but crucially, one of the largest labour pools Fascism drew on for its operations in the Horn of Africa, as well as for the agricultural colonization of Libya (Gaspari, 2002, p. 333-334; Cresti, 2011, p. 188-189) — that the sacrifice of their loved ones or themselves in the colonial wars of Fascism was a valuable and noble enterprise which served the imperial cause of the nation:

The photo of Beozzo, fallen in East Africa in the fulfillment of his duty. Next to the portrait, a medal he wore and a flag, donated by his father. A bloody dagger, striking our attention, belonged - says Miss. Maria who is accompanying us in the visit - to Rossini Angelo, who died in East Africa and was decorated with a cross by the Ministry of Italian Africa. (Cerilo, 1942, p. 3)<sup>21</sup>

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<sup>20</sup> “all'avanguardia del movimento colonialista. [A museum] che già hanno ammirato tanti gerarchi e che è conosciuto anche a Roma per l'organicità delle sue raccolte [...] ritenute tra le più complete esistenti. Ma non è solo sotto l'aspetto storico, etnografico che la raccolta va riguardata. Vi sono disposte in bell'ordine e con la consueta esattezza, le collezioni dei prodotti, fatte giungere espressamente dalle varie località dell'Impero. Vi si trova il primo grano raccolto dai nostri coloni a Gondar, i vari tipi di caffè del Gimma, dell'Harrar, del Caffa, il cotone somalo di Genale e quello del Tessaneî, il sesamo, il cocco, il tabacco, i prodotti madreporici del Mar Rosso prima e dopo la lavorazione, le pelli dei vari animali, i minerali...”

<sup>21</sup> “Ecco infatti una vetrinetta la foto di Beozzo, caduto in Africa Orientale nell'adempimento del proprio dovere. Accanto al ritratto, una medaglietta ch'egli portava al collo ed una bandierina, donate dal padre. Un pugnale insanguinato, colpisce la nostra attenzione, apparteneva — ci dice la signorina Maria che ci ac-

The museum sought to “strategically” provoke emotions in its public, as the objects showcased represented not only individual lives, but something greater: race, civilization, empire, progress, History (Griffiths & Scarantino, 2008).

Like the Museo Coloniale Maria Fioroni and the Museum of Rovereto, many institutions equipped themselves with colonial halls in the Fascist era, or enriched the collections they already owned, receiving objects from fighters, missionaries and administrators who took part in the Ethiopian campaign. Here I have analysed two cases in detail, but to gain a sense of the breadth of this phenomenon, it is only necessary to recall again the great spread of these collections: from the colonial halls at the Museo Civico di Domodossola, at the Museo della Scuola di Sanità Militare di Firenze, or the Museo zoologico di Modena, in the north of the country, to the Museo della Società Africana d'Italia di Napoli or the Museo storico del Sacario dei caduti d'Oltremare di Bari in the south, to name but a few.

Fascism also enhanced existing museums with renovations and expansions: the Museo di Villa Giulia and the Musei Capitolini in Rome were expanded in 1925, Castelvecchio in Verona was restored in 1926, a new display was curated for the Museo Nazionale di Antropologia ed Etnologia in Florence in 1931 and the Museo Pigorini in Rome in 1935, the Museo del Risorgimento was renovated in 1938,<sup>22</sup> and the Galleria Sabauda in Torino was reorganized in 1939.

However, the most ambitious projects never came to fruition: the Danteum project by Terragni-Lingeri, the E42, the Museo dell'Impero Romano, the Museo delle Scienze, the Museo delle Arti e Tradizioni popolari, the Ancient and Modern Art museums, the Museum of the Ministero dell'agricoltura e delle bonifiche, the Museo di Topografia Romana and the Museo delle Arti e della Industria, among others (Pinna, 2009, p. 18; Kallis, 2011b).

### **Colonial Museums and the Commodification of the Exotic**

Museology was without a doubt one of the investigative modalities of the European colonial project by which knowledge was produced and employed to govern (Barringer & Flynn, 1998) as colonialism was made possible, and then sustained and strengthened, as much by cultural tech-

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compagna nel orso della visita — a Rossini Angelo, morto in A.O e fregiato di croce al merito di guerra conferita dal Ministero dell'Africa Italiana.”

<sup>22</sup> Fascism presented itself once again as heir to the Italian Risorgimento tradition and the Empire as the culmination of the process of national unity (Baioni, 2012).

nologies of rule, as by the more obvious and brutal mode of conquest (Cohn, 1996).

John MacKenzie has provided a comprehensive survey of colonial museums within the British Empire (MacKenzie, 2009) followed by the further development of some interesting case studies from its provinces, presented in the volume edited by Longair and McAleer (Longair & McAleer, 2012). The importance of the provincial geographical societies in France, as bearers of an initial form of colonial propaganda, that advocated the constitution of an empire, was carefully analyzed as well (Goerg, 2002). The geographical societies spread throughout France played a key role in familiarizing the French with the colonial enterprise and with their empire. Their journals, which published reports and accounts of journeys covering the entire planet, contributed actively to this process. However scholarship to date has largely overlooked the Italian case, which offers fertile ground for reflection, precisely, as we have seen, because of its paradoxical lack of a solid tradition of museum centralization, but the pervasive presence of artefacts and specimens from the colonies in the Italian peripheries.

In *Surveiller et punir. Naissance de la prison* (1975), Michael Foucault (1926-1984) raises concerns regarding the disciplinary power of different types of institutes such as hospitals and schools. Foucault saw the possibility of these institutes forming a vast technological network of power to regulate the behavior of people in a society. Museums, Foucault believed, form part of such a network, as they have the power to discipline people's minds; it is therefore quite clear that the discourses of museums, just like those of other media such as photography, are not neutral as positivistic thinkers used to believe (Marstine, 2006). We should rather think of them as an empty stage, where different plays are performed. As it is not possible to exhibit objects without some form of subjective organization, objects are used to illustrate ideas: the wonder-cabinets of the Renaissance were at least as much about possession as about display (Lugli, 1983). The wonder derived not only from what could be seen, but from the sense that the shelves and cases were filled with unseen wonders: all the prestigious property of the collector. This way, the King or Emperor's possession of a *Kunstkammer*, the world in microcosm, expressed his symbolic mastery of the world (Greenblatt, 1991). As the emphasis on ostentation increased progressively during the nineteenth century (Kirshenblatt-Gimblett, 1991), objects and their materiality became a particularly effective propaganda medium.

It is therefore not surprising that in 1920 the French Minister of Colonies Albert Sarraut used the expression "la leçon des choses" to refer to the colonial exhibition propaganda (Goerg, 2002). And just like in situ installations and exhibitions (such as ethnographic villages, Kirshenblatt-

Gimblett, 1991), museums, no matter how mimetic, were and are vehicles for “la leçon des choses”. In the colonial European museums objects were offered for inspection (Baxandall, 1991) and judgment. They were displayed to the public in an apparently neutral and scientific way, so that it was visitors themselves who expressed a hierarchical judgment in apparent autonomy, relating their own culture and technology to that of the peoples exposed. And it is precisely this hierarchy, enacted through the exhibition and its invitation to the public to formulate a classificatory judgment, which legitimized the war of conquest, the subjugation of indigenous peoples and the exploitation of the resources of their lands, along with the war effort — the sacrifice of the lives of young Italians that such an enterprise required — and the deprivations of life in the colony. All this could be enclosed in a small coffee bean displayed thousands of kilometres away from the plant that bore it, in the remote Italian province, in which, through the exhibition of such a single small specimen, an attempt was made to instill pride in being direct descendants of Augustus and (therefore) legitimate colonizers of those remote lands. But, as Cohn reminds us for the case of the British Empire in India, the commodities of interest were not only goods with market value. In addition to the many objects that were profitably bought, sold, and generally extracted, including land (which became a commodity through the concentration on land revenue as a principal source of government income), the colonies could provide a whole host of wares that could symbolize and display imperial power; including archeological artifacts (as we have seen for the Ancient Roman ruins), ethnological and anthropological specimens (Cohn, 1996).

Although much scholarship to date has focused on the key resource of colonial national museums, the cases analysed in this article illustrate the importance of exploring provincial museums and the alternative perspective they offer. Maria Fioroni’s story, for example — that of a *woman* who was an active fascist and representative of the colonial avant-garde — offers a different image of the Italian province of the thirties, compared to the remote, out of touch, backward portrait that is usually offered.

Therefore, rather than reinforcing the traditional dichotomy between “colonial periphery” and “metropolitan Italy” it is necessary to underline the existence of a dialogue between peripheries (of the Empire and of Italy), in which the transmission of knowledge, objects and materiality between the two is rather intense and powerful, impacting and shaping the colonial consciousness of the Italian people.

Cohn describes India as an open-air museum, a source of collectibles and curiosities to fill European museums, botanical gardens, zoos, and country houses (Cohn, 1996); Angelo del Boca, on the contrary, writes that

one in ten families in Italy certainly owns an object of colonial origin. They range from Tallers of Maria Teresa to ivory bracelets [...] For half a century, dust has been depositing in this immense private museum (Del Boca, 1991, p. 6).<sup>23</sup>

If one family out of ten owns an object of colonial origin in its home, how many Italians have instead admired images and objects of African origin in temporary exhibition and in the museums that still exist today throughout Italy? It is therefore possible to speak of a pervasive colonial consciousness which has reached all the borders of the country and its extreme peripheries. A colonial consciousness which has advanced, above all, the materiality of African knowledge rather than the material knowledge of Africa, presenting populations in an *ostensibly* neutral way, telling the story of a continent reduced to objects (and almost always the same objects at that: shields and lances, drums, rudimentary jewels, wooden headrests, apparently presented as products of the same craftsmanship, coming from the same areas...), black and white photographs of ragged children and old men, and names of iconic battles.

Fascism simplified and spectacularized the exhibition and working on the legibility of the museum (Bennett, 1998), devoting its attention to ordinary visitors, encouraging the opening of museums to all social classes (with reduced prices and free tickets, for example, Pinna, 2009), in order to promote an effective and widespread ideological diffusion. Every effort was aimed at creating a colonial consciousness, a feeling of being involved in a process that deeply affected every aspect of society. Exhibitions and museums are therefore to be interpreted as parts of a larger and more complex strategy, which sought to warm a largely “cold” population to the idea of colonization, convincing Italians of their racial, moral and cultural superiority (despite the difficult economic and social conditions, international sanctions against Italy etc.).

We have seen how, to the detriment of the accenting, imperial and “Roman” narrative of Fascism (Corner & Galimi, 2014), it is more correct to speak of a “dialogue between peripheries”: those of the Empire and those of the motherland, which were united by a continuous flow of materials and people. Therefore, while Fascism failed in its attempt to centralize colonial museology, it succeeded in bringing the colonies closer to the Italian province, making sure that imperial and racist ideas penetrated deep

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<sup>23</sup> “Una famiglia su dieci in Italia possiede sicuramente un oggetto di provenienza coloniale. Si va dal tallero di Maria Teresa al braccialetto d’avorio [...] Su questo immenso museo privato, da mezzo secolo si deposita la polvere.”



into the consciousness of the Italians, to remain there well beyond the fall of the regime.

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