

# Displaying and Storing: (Post)Colonial Narratives in the Colonial Museum of Rome



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*Image 1. Inauguration of new rooms of the Colonial Museum of Rome, 17 July 1937. (Archivio Storico Luce)*

## Contents

<b>Abstract</b>	<b>3</b>
<b>Introduction</b>	<b>4</b>
<i>The Colonial Museum of Rome</i>	4
<i>Museums write narratives</i>	4
<i>Methodology: primary research</i>	5
<i>Methodology: academic context</i>	5
<i>Methodology: visual analysis</i>	5
<i>Outline</i>	5
<b>The history of the Colonial Museum</b>	<b>6</b>
<i>From scattered colonial fairs to a propaganda museum</i>	6
<i>From nostalgia to amnesia</i>	6
<i>Contemporary visions</i>	7
<b>Colonial propaganda (1914 – 1937)</b>	<b>8</b>
<i>A colonial Wunderkammer</i>	8
<i>A broad collection for a universal propaganda</i>	9
Ethnography	9
Archaeology	10
Visual arts	11
Military	13
Economy	14
<b>Ideological ambiguity (1937 – 1971)</b>	<b>16</b>
<b>Removal of memory (1971 - 2017)</b>	<b>17</b>
<b>Post-colonial re-interpretation (2017 - ongoing)</b>	<b>19</b>
<i>Opening the boxes</i>	19
<i>The venus of Cyrene: questioning by exhibiting</i>	19
<i>The future of storing</i>	21
<b>Conclusions</b>	<b>22</b>
<i>Narratives of exhibiting and storing</i>	22
<b>Discussion</b>	<b>23</b>
<i>Un paese meticcio</i>	23
<i>Work in progress</i>	23
<b>Bibliography</b>	<b>25</b>
<b>List of images</b>	<b>28</b>

## Abstract

In recent years, activists and researchers have been raising their voices to confront the amnesia of ninety years of colonial memory that affects Italian society. One of the main objects of study, and now an active subject promoting debate, is the Colonial Museum of Rome, a fascist institution for colonial propaganda, which eclipsed into oblivion in 1971, only to be unearthed in 2017.

Reading this museum as a text, this research explores: *what narratives concerning colonial memory have been constructed by displaying and storing objects?* The question is approached by connecting the wider narratives identified by historians with the displays of the Colonial Museum, through images and historical accounts.

Four phases were identified in the history of the museum. During the first phase (1914-1937), the museum was born and functioned as an unscientific instrument at the service of the colonial mission, exhibiting a broad variety of objects for a universal propaganda. With the advent of the war and the independence of the colonies, the museum remained trapped in an *inertia memoriae*. It kept perpetuating the same narratives, only stripped of its fascist symbols (1937-1971). In 1971 the doors of the museum closed and remained locked for almost half a century, hindering social awareness and historical research on Italian colonialism (1971-2017). Since 2017, as the deposits were opened again, an ongoing process is re-evaluating and re-exhibiting the collection to problematise its history.

By investigating the narratives shaped by the museum from its origins until the present, this investigation brings attention to the power of storing and displaying in constructing the histories we want to tell today, at the intersection of memory and identity with issues of race, civil rights, freedom of movement and international relations.

## Introduction

*Stories are the best antidote to ignorance* (Bianchi & Scego, 2014)

In recent years, the European migrant crisis and civil-rights Black Lives Matter movements have confronted the Italian consciousness on its racism and historical identity. Activists and researchers raised the thick layer of dust which had been covering and suffocating ninety years of history of Italian colonialism. As issues of race, civil rights, freedom of movement and international relations are discussed, the country has been unable to recognise - or is unaware of - its shared history and responsibility towards former colonies. Political interests, educational curricula and public institutions rendered murky the waters of history and guided the country towards an amnesia of its colonial past. Academic and historical research, visual arts and storytelling must bring back to the table the history of our country, if we are to build a *paese meticcio*<sup>1</sup>, a multi-cultural society that is anti-racist and de-colonial.

## The Colonial Museum of Rome

In recent years, attention has been drawn to the former Colonial Museum of Rome, which was closed in 1971. In 2017, the new curators declared their intentions to engage with its heritage through a pluralist and post-colonial agenda. There are 97 colonial collections exhibited in Italy (Falccucci, 2022), most of them barely known, even to the local public. However, the Colonial Museum is the one most preoccupied with engaging in a process of decolonisation, due to its collection's importance and its public ownership.

Parallel to civil society and artists, also the academic interest in the museum increased. Its history is relatively well documented and its archives have become more accessible. Based on the existing knowledge, this paper observes the museum as a text, as introduced by Clifford and Marcus (1986). Museums, as much as statues, speeches and history books, are instruments through which narratives are created and ideologies are fueled. (Delpino, n.d.) Thus, this research investigates the relationship between a museum's narratives and colonial memory, history, and identity in the context of Italy, from the beginning of the last century until today.

## Museums write narratives

The central question which emerges is: throughout the history of the Colonial Museum of Rome, *what narratives concerning colonial memory have been constructed by displaying and storing objects?*

The aim is to better understand the implications of the content, spatial arrangement and method of exhibiting. Why were certain items exhibited in the museum? Where? And how were they displayed? Of equal importance is the other side of the coin: the content, arrangement and method of storing. How did exhibiting and storing shape different museographic narratives across time? Although beyond the scope of this paper, being aware of these narratives can help us better understand contemporary behaviours in Italy regarding racism, migration and international relations. By reading the museum as

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<sup>1</sup> The word *meticcio* can be literally translated to mixed race. However, in the context of post-colonial writing in Italy it has taken a much deeper and nuanced meaning. It stands for multi-cultural, anti-racist, de-colonial. And beyond that, it stands for destabilising static and restrictive notions, such as that of national identity.

a text, what emerges is an image of the exhibitors, rather than of what is exhibited. “Through the image of Africa and its inhabitants, emerges the image of the coloniser”. (Fiorletta, 2019)

### Methodology: primary research

The primary research is based on visits to the relevant institutions and archives. The Museo delle Civiltà (MuCiv) - which accommodates the collection of the former Colonial Museum - its deposits, and the National Central Library (NCL) of Rome, where the written and photographic documentation of the Colonial Museum is conserved. Discussing with the new curators, Gaia Delpino e Rosa Anna Di Lella, was not only inspiring, but also fundamental for understanding their contemporary vision of a de-colonial institution. During my visit to Rome, I had the chance to attend events on colonial heritage: round-table discussions around the NCL collections and conferences by experts on colonial heritage. The environment evokes a vibrant atmosphere of growing interest in the topic, which until recently was largely neglected outside of a small academic circle.

These moments allowed for the collection of primary sources: the interview with the colonial museum curators, personal photographs of the temporary exhibition and deposits, and photographic material from the NCL and Istituto Luce.

### Methodology: academic context

This study is based on Italian postcolonial history, which reconstructs the colonial mission and problematises the past in relation to the present. This research makes use of knowledge of the myths of *Italiani brava gente* (del Boca, 2005; Battista, 2004) and *Romanitas* (Gravano, 2016; Munzi, 2001; Vino, 2017) to explain the origin of the museum’s narratives. The museum itself is understood as an active cause of the phenomenon of removal of colonial memory (Clifford and Marcus, 1997; Bianchi & Scego, 2014; Fiorletta, 2019). On the topic of heritage, Macdonald’s understanding of ‘difficult heritage’ (2009) and its translation to the Italian context by Ferrini (2020) and Fuller (2021) is adopted.

The research is based on the academic context of Italy, with the inclusion of Anglo-Saxon voices. No researchers, artists or activists from former colonies – apart from Italo-African ones – are cited in this thesis. Although this is a strong limitation of the research, it also confines it to an introspective investigation of how Italy’s academic circles and society perceive this history and discuss its implications.

### Methodology: visual analysis

The primary and secondary research are combined through a visual analysis which draws the direct link between the museum displays and the larger narratives. As John Berger (1972) deconstructs the European tradition of oil painting, this research wants to adopt the same *ways of seeing* to deconstruct the narratives created by the museum, reading the museum as a text. This analysis is limited by the presence and accessibility of photographic material on the museum across time.

### Outline

This paper starts by delineating the historical background of the museum, from its origins to present-day. Understanding its history and physical and institutional evolution is necessary to contextualise the production of narratives. Then, it analyses how the practices of displaying and storing have produced different narratives in four phases. Firstly, the museum as an instrument of colonial propaganda, from its origins until 1937. Secondly, the phase of ideological ambiguity and institutional

weakness, from 1937 until its definitive closure in 1971. Thirdly, the forty-five years of closure of the museum and removal of memory, from 1971 until 2017. Finally, the attempts during the last years to re-interpret the collection with post-colonial awareness.

## The history of the Colonial Museum

### From scattered colonial fairs to a propaganda museum

When Italy's colonial efforts began, Europe already counted several colonial museums of anthropology or natural science that demonstrated its imperial power. The first attempt to form such an institution in Italy was the short-lived project of the Colonial Herbarium and Museum founded in Rome in 1904. This was a scientific project which was mainly interested in the sciences of botany and agriculture. Unlike this first attempt, the Colonial Museum which was established in 1914 came from a political and propagandistic interest and was initiated by the Ministry of Colonies.

Since the late 18<sup>th</sup> century, private collections of colonial *mirabilia* had been growing as a result of 'geographic explorations' and economic activities. Numerous and very successful colonial fairs were held in Italy since 1881<sup>2</sup>. It is from the material exhibited in these fairs that the Ministry of Colonies constituted the Colonial Museum in 1914, hosted in Palazzo della Consulta, Rome. As the collection was growing, in 1935 the museum was moved and renamed the Museum of Italian Africa, in line with the Italian invasion of Ethiopia (1935-37) and Mussolini's proclamation in 1936 of the empire which subjugated present-day Libya, Somalia, Eritrea and Ethiopia. The new museum finally had a venue worthy of its ambitions. It occupied a whole building in via Aldrovandi, within the zoological gardens. The museum closed in 1937 for a reorganisation of its inventory. It remained closed during WWII and reopened only in 1947.

(Benaglia, 2020) (Delpino, n.d.) (Gandolfo, 2014)

### From nostalgia to amnesia

After the war, the international scenario was completely changed. In the Paris Peace Treaties of 1947, Italy had to give up its sovereignty on all territories in Africa, which the country had *de facto* already lost during the war. However, in 1950 the United Nations placed Somaliland under a 10-year trusteeship to Italy, instead of recognising its self-determination. In 1947 Italy promised to return to former colonies all the stolen heritage: monuments, statues and objects. The decades-long internal debate on the topic resulted in the undoubtedly delayed restitution of most of the formally requested heritage. For instance, the statue of the *Venus of Cyrene* was returned to Libya only in 2008, despite Italy's promise in 1947 and the official request for restitution in 1989.

In the post-war transformed situation, the museum missed a historical opportunity to re-evaluate its collection, and instead lingered inertially on its pre-war ideals, feeding on the surviving expansionist feelings. After the war, the museum did not have a long and prosperous life and eventually closed in 1971. This date is the start of a period of oblivion, during which the collections, and the history of

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<sup>2</sup> For an account of the colonial fairs and their content, see:  
Tomasella, G. (2017). *Esporre l'Italia coloniale. Interpretazioni dell'alterità*. Il Poligrafo.

Italian colonialism, remained hidden in a temporal limbo. The unity of the collection was broken, as many objects were transferred to other institutions. After many intermediary steps, the collections became part of the MuCiv in 2016. Throughout its history, the museum changed its name, location and institutional responsibility several times. Almost in constant ideological and bureaucratic precariousness, the museum never established itself as a solid institution.

(Benaglia, 2020) (Delpino, n.d.) (Fiorletta, 2019) (Gandolfo, 2014)

## Contemporary visions

In 2017, the process of re-inventory of the collection and of imagining a new display that would question this heritage started. In May 2020, the new Museo Italo-Africano “Ilaria Alpi” was announced for opening in 2021 (Gambari et al., 2020). Following mixed reactions to this announcement, ranging from support to harsh criticism, the curators took a step back. The “Unveiled Storages” project was initiated, a long-term process that invites external voices to share their opinions, knowledge and perspectives on how to deal with the museum’s colonial collection.

(Benaglia, 2020) (Delpino, n.d.) (Delpino et al., 2021) (Delpino et. al, 2022) (Fiorletta, 2019) (Gandolfo, 2014)

## Colonial propaganda (1914 – 1937)

*Museums are also part of the instruments used by states to narrate and transmit the past* (Delpino, n.d.)

### A colonial Wunderkammer

While other major European institutions exhibiting objects from the colonial empires were ‘scientific’ museums, the Colonial Museum of Rome was born as a museum of imperial propaganda. It must be made clear that also ‘sciences’, such as ethnography, were not used neutrally, but as political and supremacist tools. Nevertheless, ‘scientific’ museums had a specific interest and method around which to organise exhibitions and archives. Instead, the Colonial Museum of Rome was managed by the Ministry of Italian Africa, by the generals and strongest advocates of the colonial expansion. (Delpino et al., 2022)

The unscientific nature of this museum had important consequences. Firstly, the objects were not exposed with a clear logic or with rich didactic information, but rather in a confusing way. (Di Lella, 2020) The museum was closer to 17<sup>th</sup>- or 18<sup>th</sup>-century *Wunderkammern* than to contemporary ‘scientific’ museums. *Wunderkammern* exhibited exotic *mirabilia*, objects from trade or ‘discoveries’, but did not present the material through scientific categorisation and study. As it can be observed in [Image 2], different objects are exposed in the same room, next to each other: military equipment, paintings by Italian artists, photographs, emblems, etc. The result is a rich visual experience that captivates the visitor, similar to the *Wunderkammer* in [Image 3], rather than a didactic exhibition of scientific information. Only in 1937, the museum organised its collection in different thematic rooms.



Image 2. Inauguration of new rooms of the Colonial Museum of Rome, 17 July 1937. (Archivio Storico Luce)



Image 3. Cabinets of curiosities, Georg Hainz, 1666, Kunsthalle Hamburg.



Beyond creating a different visual experience, the ‘un-scientificity’ of the Colonial Museum has strong implications up to these days. In the absence of a formal methodology, there is often no archival information or object biography. This makes it extremely hard, in the context of the present re-interpretation of the collection, to restore the history of the objects and the subjectivity of the people represented. (Di Lella & Delpino, 2022)

## A broad collection for a universal propaganda

Although the items of the museum were often exposed without a rigorous classification, the following categories of items can be identified: ethnographic, archeologic, artistic, military and economic. (Delpino, n.d.) This chapter explores how all these categories contributed in different ways to the celebration of the colonial mission.

### Ethnography

Despite the lack of an overarching scientific methodology, ethnographic objects were presented to construct an ‘exotic context’ for the Italian endeavours, but also to justify the ‘mission of civilisation’. (Delpino, 2020) In the 19<sup>th</sup> century, theories about the polygenic nature of the human species were derived from Evolutionism. These theories argued about the existence of different human species and of a hierarchy between them, which was demonstrated through the study of physical features and social practices. (Gandolfo, 2014) The facial plaster casts produced by Lidio Cipriani during his anthropological missions in the 1930s are also part of the collection [Figure 4]. By pouring warm gypsum on a lying person, he would create a gypsum mould through which it was possible to make plaster casts, which were then painted to represent skin colour and facial features. The Colonial Museum used ethnography not to study each species or ‘type’, but to justify the invasion through the racist argument of natural superiority.

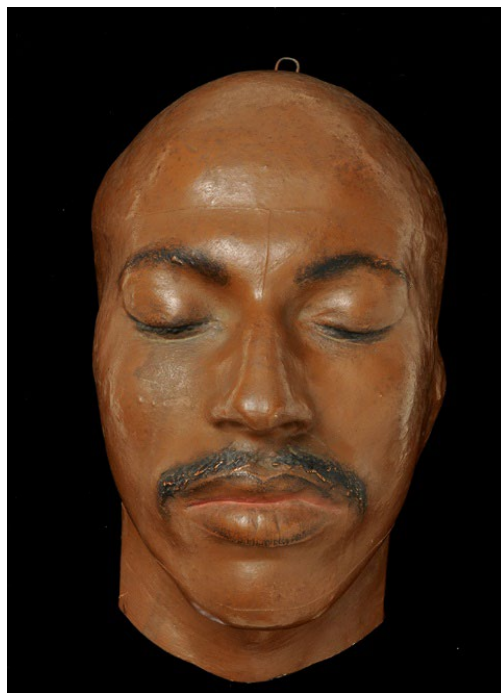


Image 4. Plaster cast by Lidio Cipriani, collection of the Colonial Museum, MuCiv. (Di Lella et al., 2020)

## Archaeology

Far from being a neutral subject, archaeology legitimised the colonial expansions, depicting Libya as a Latin land where the *romanitas* was finally being restored. *Romanitas* refers to the myth of continuity between contemporary Italy and the civilisation of ancient Rome, often used to create a national identity of superiority. (Munzi, 2001; Gravano, 2016) Through his propaganda, Mussolini emphasised the direct connection between the Roman empire of Augustus and the new empire proclaimed in 1936, generating a false historical precedent that made the fascist mission impellent and eternal. (Gravano, 2016; Visser, 1992) Within the overall exoticness of the *Wunderkammer's mirabilia*, the archaeological objects and representations provided the visitors with something to relate to and connect with. An Otherness which was not generic, but that was clearly identifiable as the Latin and Italian Africa, naturally belonging to the descendants of Augustus. (Gandolfo, 2014)

The regime invested largely in archaeological excavations in the colonies. For instance, Sabratha and Leptis Magna [Images 5, 6] were largely excavated and studied by Italian archaeologists during the 1930s. The regime wanted to establish itself as the heir of the Roman civilisation, both to the Italian people and to the international scene. For instance, in the 1931 *Exposition Coloniale de Paris*, Italy did not focus its exhibition on its achievements in the colonised territories, but rather on the archaeological heritage. By doing so, it claimed that all Mediterranean colonising countries were united in their mission by their common descendance from the eternal city of Rome. (Gravano, 2016)



Image 5. Maquette of the Sabratha theatre, collection of the Colonial Museum, MuCiv, 2022.



Image 6. Maquette of the thermal baths of Leptis Magna, collection of the Colonial Museum, MuCiv, 2022.

### Visual arts

The use of arts,<sup>3</sup> predominantly paintings, touched on visitors' emotions to reinforce narratives that were dear to the colonial propaganda: military celebrations, exotic representation of Otherness and cult of *romanitas*. All national artistic production was controlled and censored during the fascist regime. Certain themes, such as the colonial subject, were requested and encouraged.

The canvas in [Image 7] – also visible as exposed in the Colonial Museum in 1937, [Image 10] - is an emotionally charged representation of the Battle of Dogali, commissioned to Michele Cammarano to “represent the glorious deeds of Dogali and remember the heroic virtues of Italian soldiers.” – letter by the Minister of Education Paolo Boselli to the artist, 1888. (Alpozzi, 2017)



Image 7. La Battaglia di Dogali, Michele Cammarano, 1886, oil on canvas

<sup>3</sup> For a catalogue of the visual art collection of the Colonial Museum, see: *Dipinti, sculture e grafica delle collezioni del Museo africano. Catalogo generale*. Istituto Italiano per l’Africa e l’Oriente Margozi 2005)

Images were used to evoke nationalist feelings. The drawing of *Italy draws the sword of ancient Rome* [Image 8] by Fortunino Matania was used on postcards to celebrate Italian soldiers in Libya. The Italian sailor in Libya takes up the sword, the legacy and the legitimacy of the Roman legionnaire. Images of this kind are powerful tools for the creation of myths, even of completely opposite ideologies. For the sake of visual analysis and ideological contrast, we can compare the drawing of the Italian sailor with the lionised image of Zerai Deres. Zerai Deres is a national anti-colonial hero in Ethiopia and Eritrea. The drawing of [Image 9] depicts the episode that made him a hero. In 1938, in Rome, Deres was showing his devotion to the statue of the Lion of Judah, stolen from Addis Ababa in 1935 and located next to the monument of the Battle of Dogali. As an Italian officer interrupted him, Deres wounded him with a scimitar, while praising the Negus and slandering the fascist state.

In the visual comparison below, the legendary figures of the Italian sailor and Zerai Deres confront each other in a battle of propaganda. This comparison shows how the creation of myths through visual sources is a transversal practice that can suit any ideology.



Image 8. *L'Italia Brandisce La Spada dell'Antica Roma*, Fortunino Matania. (*The Sphere*, 1911)



Image 9. Print drawing of Zerai Deres' mythicised episode in Rome. (Wikimedia)

Therefore, visual arts were exposed in the museum to impress emotionally the colonial consciousness of the visitors and to feed nationalist narratives.

## Military

Cannons, rifles and uniforms of Italian soldiers on one side [Image 10], and ‘primitive’ weapons of colonized populations on the other side [Image 11], together with picturesque representations of battles. The objective of exhibiting these objects was to celebrate Italy’s military power and superiority, depicting an image that was far removed from the military struggle of Italy’s conquest and occupation. This internalised narrative of absolute military superiority led the unprepared colonising forces to numerous military losses, and then led them to use yperite gases and commit several war crimes for the sake of demonstrating through any available means this superiority. Unsurprisingly, yperite gas never made it to the exhibition rooms of the Colonial Museum. It is from these instances that we understand the importance of non-exhibiting in the creation of memory and narratives. Only in the late 1990s, public consensus was reached regarding the war crimes committed against civilians, (Messina, 2016) when the myth of *Italiani brava gente* (Del Boca, 2005) was finally confronted with the historical evidence of brutal colonisation, thanks to the work of historian Del Boca.



Image 10. Inauguration of new rooms of the Colonial Museum, 17 July 1937. (Gandolfo, 2014)

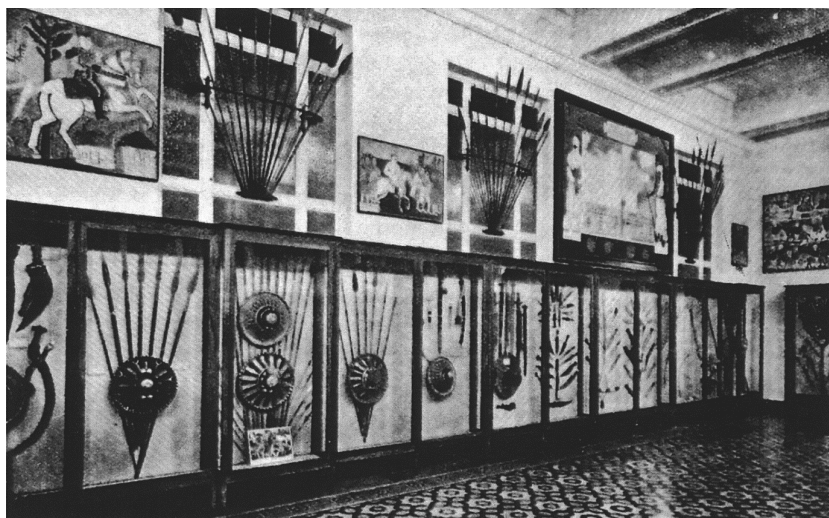


Image 11. Room of the Ethiopian weapons, Colonial Museum. (Gandolfo, 2014)

## Economy

The last category discussed is that of economic production, which documented all industrial and artisanal production and collected specimens of natural and man-made products. With this collection, the museum emphasised the exploitative potential of colonisation. Beyond being a strategy of national identity, international relations and race, colonisation was also an economic strategy. (Gandolfo, 2014) By exploiting land, resources and labour, the empire was to enrich the Italian economy. Moreover, it was meant to re-direct the large Italian emigration into colonial territories, so that the emigrated labour would still contribute to Italy's economy. For instance, the Ministry of Colonies commissioned a maquette of Villaggio Azzurro – in the area of Haz-Haz, Asmara - to showcase the construction work carried out in the colonies [Image 12, 13]. As a matter of fact, Italy's colonial efforts are considered to have had higher costs than revenues for Italy's economy. This is mainly due to the military efforts which turned out to be much higher than the short-sighted political class, with their belief in absolute superiority, had expected.



Image 12. Maquette of Villaggio Azzurro (Haz-Haz, Asmara), at the International Exhibition of Colonial Art in Naples, 1934. (Archivio Storico Luce)



Image 13. Maquette of Villaggio Azzurro (Haz-Haz, Asmara) in the deposits of the Colonial Museum, MuCiv, 2022.

In conclusion, the Colonial Museum was founded as an instrument of propaganda, without a strong scientific method. Throughout the first phase of its existence, the museum collected and exhibited ethnographic, military, archaeological, artistic and commodity-related objects, often displayed next to each other composing propagandistic *Wunderkammern*. The variety of objects, and the way they were exhibited, created an all-rounded visual experience that enhanced myths and narratives of *italiani brava gente*, nostalgic *romanitas*, racial and military superiority, economic growth and civilising mission.

## Ideological ambiguity (1937 – 1971)

*As colonial culture and propaganda had vanished, what message could be promoted by the Museum? None. And this is why it kept insisting on the past, in an attempt to transform it into a historical present. (Gandolfo, 2014, p. 500-1)*

The myths of *Italiani brava gente* and Roman imperialist legitimacy persisted from the colonial era. In the aftermath of WWII and of the 1946 referendum which established the Republic, Italy condemned the fascist ideology. Iconographies of Mussolini and of the highest fascist heroes were removed, but the absence of an equivalent to the Nuremberg trials impeded a serious reflection on responsibility, especially on the topic of colonialism (Troglio, 2017). Italy's population switched from fascism to democracy without a deep historical reflection.

In parallel, the former political and cultural class camouflaged and maintained a large part of the establishment. (Palma, 2019) For instance, in 1952, the government commissioned 24 former colonial officials and colonial Africanists to document and evaluate Italy's colonial activities, which resulted in 40 volumes of "Italy in Africa", an undoubtedly biased and celebrative publication. (Palma, 2019) Historical, societal and individual awareness were sacrificed in those years for the sake of forming a solid national identity. Italy condemned fascism, but avoided a critical discussion of the sixty years of colonial history preceding Mussolini, thus failing to recognise the elements of continuity between pre-fascist and fascist Italy. In this moment of fundamental transition for Italy, the Colonial Museum was not able to innovate its approach and *raison d'être*. Instead of finding new ways to promote its collection, it indulged in the continuation of the same narratives, cleaned from the most evidently fascist manifestations. In [image 14] can be seen some of the busts of fascist generals and colonial protagonists that were removed from display.



Image 14. Busts of colonial generals removed from display, former Colonial Museum, 2017. (Contini, 2019)



The museum transitioned from the celebration of 'fascistisation' of the colonies to the celebration of the 'civilising' efforts of Italians in Africa across all times: Roman imperialism, 19<sup>th</sup>-century 'expansions', but also 'de-fascistised' fascist colonisation. (Gandolfo, 2014) The museum became a tool for the expansionists' claims on the lost overseas governance. To the disappointment of a large part of Italy's political class, Italy's 'only' legacy would be the Trust Territory of Somaliland of 1950, which de facto extended the subjugation of Somalia for ten years.

While it is difficult to analyse visually the museum's de-fascistisation due to a lack of visual documentation, it is possible to understand this process in parallel to what happened throughout Italy. The country's rush and need to restart weakened the ideological foundations of post-war Italy. After WWII, the country carried out a *damnatio memoriae* of the icons of Mussolini, while it retained all other symbols, monuments and architecture, especially those which were dedicated to pre-fascist events. (Fuller, 2021) This happened because of the omnipresent quantity of representations and constructions, but also because of gaps in anti-fascist legislation (Ben-Ghiat, 2017). In this process, the museum and the nation got trapped in what Fuller (2021) described as *inertia memoriae*: the nation's co-existence with unquestioned symbols from the fascist and colonial past, which are treated as heritage and depoliticised aesthetic objects. Italy lacked the problematisation of heritage which is discussed in the German context as 'difficult heritage' (Macdonald, 2009). Instead, in Italy, these visual and architectural objects became heritage and thus were sheltered from any questioning. Only since very recently and with an enormous amount of effort, as it is explored in the last chapter, the museum and the nation as a whole are questioning their heritage.

Therefore, in this phase of ideological weakness, colonial nostalgia and *inertia memoriae*, the museum kept perpetuating its previous narratives, only stripped of the most obvious symbols of fascist propaganda.

## Removal of memory (1971 - 2017)

*"Today the Colonial Museum is a ghost museum and as such it belongs to nobody."* (Gandolfo, 2014, p. 531)

Denial of representation: of a museum, of a city, of history and memory. In 1971 the doors of the museum closed and remained locked for almost half a century. Like an underground cellar, the museum became the place where to hide the ghosts of a country's history to be able to construct a clean and pure national identity.

As a counterpart to the idea of exhibiting, this chapter discusses the power of storing and thus hiding a museum's collection in the creation of national narratives in Italy. The decision to close a museum and to render its collection inaccessible is not a neutral gesture. (Fiorletta, 2019) Museums, as public institutions, define what is part of, and what is excluded from, the history of a community or nation. By writing a certain history, the identity of the citizens is formed. This is how museums take part in the chain of memory, history and identity.

While we are accustomed to reading the museum as a text (Clifford & Marcus, 1986), it is less discussed what narratives are produced by what does not make it to the museum's display. What is not displayed, and thus hidden, creates gaps in memory. Italy has undergone a process of removal of memory, such that today the society seems to suffer from amnesia of its colonial history. (Bianchi & Scego, 2014) Alongside education and institutional responsibility, museology is an active part of the causes of the country's loss of memory.

As an active gesture of removal, the closure of the museum from 1971 until the present day has had three main consequences. Firstly, it impeded a social awareness of the history of colonialism. Regardless of the narrative through which they are exhibited, the mere accessibility of the collection contributes at least to some sort of public awareness of ninety years of colonial activity in the African continent, which is today completely ignored by a large part of the population. Secondly, it hinders historical and artistic research on the topic. The extensive historical research on Italian colonialism started in the late '70s - mainly with the work of Del Boca, 1976-84 - and since then advanced slowly, while it has increased in recent years, in parallel to the re-opening of the museum's deposits.

Thirdly, due to the state of negligence in which the objects were kept for more than 45 years, many items have degraded irreparably, especially the organic ones. This negligence not only decreased the knowledge and the value of the collection, but it is also a lack of respect for the personal stories and experiences behind these objects.

## Post-colonial re-interpretation (2017 - ongoing)

*To decolonise is to deconstruct and reconstruct a new and different museum that induces the visitors to question and reflect. (Delpino, n.d.)*

### Opening the boxes

In 2017, after forty-six years of darkness, the deposits were opened again, as the collections moved to the Museo delle Civiltà' (MuCiv). The first priorities were to check the inventory and to restore damaged objects, operations which are now nearly completed. (Di Lella & Delpino, 2022) In parallel, the curation team started working on the display and carried out an architectural competition for the repurposing of the designated spaces. On 25<sup>th</sup> May 2020, the opening of the Museo Italo-Africano "Ilaria Alpi" was announced for the following year. (Gambari et al., 2020) This step came perhaps too hastily, and the reactions by civil society and scholars to this announcement were varied. Some were supportive of the long-awaited re-opening of the collections to the public, such as writer and researcher Igiaba Scego (2020). Others claimed that the initiative would reinforce colonial and racist modes of thinking. It was pointed out how the proposal lacked specific expertise in postcolonial studies, experts from former colonies and an ethical board that would assess the project. (Ferrini, 2020) Moreover, the museum's presentation included many references to Roman history and influence, without problematising the museum's history of Roman imperial legitimisation. (Ferrini, 2020; Benaglia, 2020) Some claimed that working on how to display the collections risks becoming a re-branding strategy that distracts the attention from more fundamental questions such as the legitimacy of the museum's collection.

On the contrary, this paper argues for the power of displaying and of not displaying. That is why it is important to analyse the way the new curation team is approaching the collection.

### The venus of Cyrene: questioning by exhibiting

The temporary exhibition "How to imagine a decolonial museum?" was set up in 2021 as a work in progress. We can analyse the way the *Venus of Cyrene* is displayed to clarify how curatorial choices problematise the museum's collection. This statue is a copy of the Hellenistic original which is from the 4<sup>th</sup> century BCE. The original was found during archaeological excavations in Cyrene and transported to Italy in 1913. In 1989 Libya requested the restitution of this stolen heritage, which was completed in 2008, after many years of internal debate. This event was not only an act of colonial restitution, but rather a political gesture within the complex diplomatic relationships between Italy and Libya concerning migration, energy and resources, etc. By some it is considered a 'personal gift' by Silvio Berlusconi to Muammar Gaddafi. (Corriere della Sera, 2008)



Image 15. Berlusconi and Gaddafi with the Venus of Cyrene, on the occasion of a treaty on colonial compensations, migration and gas. Bengasi, 2008

Instead of exhibiting the object for its aesthetic value, the curators want to present it as a multi-layered historical document. [Image 16] The Venus is presented as if it was being stored: it stands on a pallet, wrapped in plastic, without a prominent spatial or lighting configuration. Its appearance is at first destabilising. By presenting itself in an unusual way, the object forces the observer to inquire and question their own aesthetic gaze. This allows for curiosity about the history of the object and the themes entangled with it: *romanitas* and colonial legitimisation through archaeology, subtraction of cultural heritage, colonial restitutions and the connection between colonial history and present international relations.



Image 17. The Venus of Cyrene in the exhibition "How to imagine a decolonial museum?", MuCiv, 2022.



Image 16. Christo wrapping the Venus in Villa Borghese, 1963. (Marson, 2014)

The act of exhibiting a wrapped Venus finds resonances in the history of art in Rome. In 1963, Christo wrapped a Venus in Villa Borghese, Rome [Image 17]. When, in 1995, Christo and Jeanne-Claude wrapped the Reichstag in Berlin, an enormous amount of visual attention and critical reflection was brought to the importance of the building's history for the future of Berlin's identity. Similarly, wrapping the *Venus of Cyrene* makes us reflect on its history and its meaning for the contemporary identity of a colonial state. How do we understand the instrumentalisation of a statue for legitimising colonisation? How do we read and appreciate works of art? What do we make of the debate that surrounded the restitution of this statue? How do we understand contemporary international relations and migration in light of all of this?

The aim of this exhibition and of the over-arching long-term project “Unveiled Storages” is indeed to pose questions. In the exhibition, these questions stand in front of the objects exposed, which are seen through the transparency of the text banners. The curators are literally pushing us to look at these objects through these questions: How to represent the colonial discourse? How to restore the subjectivity of colonised peoples? How to avoid the celebration? How to deconstruct the myth of the Roman empire? How to exhibit violence? How to avoid the removal of the colonial experience? How to display theft?



Image 18. The temporary exhibition “How to imagine a decolonial museum?” (Di Lella et al., 2021)

## The future of storing

Together with civil society, researchers, artists and affected communities, the curatorial team is trying to bring more objects from the deposits into a relatively permanent exhibition. At this stage, the question about deposits and storage becomes pressing. How are the act of storing and the physical space of storage used in the museum today? It is fundamental to tell the story of how these objects remained locked in a deposit for almost fifty years. As other museums have been doing in recent years, the curators expressed their desire to make the deposits accessible as an exhibition space for visitors. However, because of logistical reasons concerning the MuCiv, this is not a possibility in the short- and medium-term. (Di Lella & Delpino, 2022) Nevertheless, it is still possible to discuss the implication of storing objects through their display, as it was done for the *Venus of Cyrene*.

## Conclusions

### Narratives of exhibiting and storing

Having established the importance of understanding the past in order to take a position in the contemporary context of Italy, this research looks at the evolution of narratives up to the present to reflect on what kind of stories we want to tell today. It tries to fill an interpretative gap between history and museology and it does so using three instruments. Firstly, by relying on existing research and journalism on colonial narratives and museum practices. Secondly, by using primary sources: photographic documentation of the museum and interviews with the present-day museum curators. Thirdly, by performing a visual analysis that connects the former two: on one hand the existing narratives on Italian colonialism, and on the other the visual material. The result is an interpretation of how the displaying and storing of objects in the Colonial Museum has enforced certain narratives across four identified phases of its history.

Firstly, the phase of colonial propaganda (1914 – 1937) saw the establishment of a museum without solid scientific foundations, that exhibited objects like an 18<sup>th</sup>-century *Wunderkammer*. Its universal propaganda was formed by a variety of categories of objects. Ethnography formed an exotic context and justified the invasion through the racist argument of natural superiority. Archaeology was fundamental to feed the myth of *romanitas* and legitimise the empire. Visual arts contributed with an emotional charge to the propagandistic narratives. Military equipment propagated a false idea of military superiority. Industrial, artisanal and natural products emphasised the exploitative potential of colonisation.

Secondly, the museum went through a phase of ideological ambiguity (1937 – 1971), since it was not able to critically question its purpose after the end of the fascist regime. It became an incubator of colonial nostalgia and *inertia memoriae*, perpetuating the same narratives, only stripped of the most obvious symbols of fascist propaganda.

Thirdly, the active gesture of closing the museum and relegating it to almost forty years of oblivion (1971 – 2017) demonstrates the power of storing in forming narratives. It strongly contributed to the removal of memory and today's colonial amnesia. It impeded social awareness and historical and artistic research, besides degrading the physical state of the collection and dishonouring the personal stories behind the objects.

Finally, in 2017 the destiny of the museum changed drastically, as its storages are being unveiled and collections are being made available to researchers and the public. In order to question the history and discuss contemporary affairs through an open dialogue on the museum's objects, both practices of exhibiting and storing are used by the curators. Exhibiting becomes a tool for questioning the presence of the objects, the way they became part of the collection and the way they have been exhibited in the past. On the other hand, given the role that concealing has had for the past forty years, the storage space becomes a focal point for the museum.

## Discussion

*Only by taking responsibility for the past, it is possible to build a country that is truly meticcio*  
(Bianchi & Scego, 2014, p. 125)

### Un paese meticcio

As researchers, artists and civil society from within and from outside of Italy have raised their voices regarding the history of Italian colonialism, the gaps in knowledge and interpretations of this history and its relation with contemporary times are being addressed. The Colonial Museum of Rome has become one of the main objects of study, but also one of the main subjects promoting debate. As a result, the history of the museum has been well documented and artists have been invited to engage with the museum's collections.

More aspects of the history of colonial museology in Italy need further research. For example, within the Colonial Museum, it would be important to study the influence of the physical context, the architecture, on the narratives created by the exhibitions. And beyond the Colonial Museum, there are so many collections of objects of colonial origin that deserve more attention. But most importantly, what is needed is a stronger dialogue between researchers from Italy/the West and from formerly colonised countries.

While there has been a lot of progress in historical research, much more groundwork is needed in the political and social spheres. (Palma, 2019) This is the space that needs to be filled by artists, journalists and activists, but also by the active consciousness of each one of us as Italians, citizens of a *paese meticcio*.

### Work in progress

After visiting the deposits of the Colonial Museum at the MuCiv, I strolled around the area, a fascist monumental complex built for the Universal Exposition of Rome (EUR) of 1942. As I walked to the backside of the museum, a construction site enclosed its monumental colonnade [Image 19].

This trivial working site appeared to me as a perfect metaphor. The physical heritage of our fascist and colonial past, embodied in EUR architecture and in the museum's collections, is now under scrutiny. The site appears chaotic, but deserted. After forty years of oblivion, this is a moment of reflection and of a multiplicity of voices. The results of this problematization are still to be seen fully, but what is precious is the ongoing process.



*Image 19. "Construction work in progress" at the backside of the MuCiv, home to the Colonial Museum, 2022.*

I believe this "work in progress" sign should never be removed. Even when the building's renovation will be completed and the Colonial Museum will have a permanent exhibition. It is important that we keep reflecting and do not allow narratives to settle permanently, unquestioned.



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