

L'impero nei musei.
Storie di collezioni coloniali italiane

Beatrice Falcucci
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Exhaustive critical accounts of the consequences of European colonialism and empire are almost as old as colonialism and empire themselves. Bartolomé de las Casas' censure of Spanish abuse in America was as singular as it was grounded in its time, with its rejection of violence and calls for evangelisation.¹ Perhaps something similar could be said of Diderot's and Raynal's enlightened rejection of the right to empire and their invitation to resistance.² Remote precedents left aside, Frantz Fanon's denunciation of colonialism as 'a systematized negation of the other, a frenzied determination to deny the other any attribute of humanity' is the *locus classicus* of the beginning of postcolonial critique.³ It is well known that this was followed by thorough research on the continuities of colonial cultural attitudes after the end of empires themselves, guided by the understanding that colonialism and imperialism 'are supported and perhaps even impelled by impressive ideological formations that include notions that certain territories and people require and beseech domination'.⁴

More recently, of course, the interest of specialists has turned to the role of the exhibition of objects obtained from the colonies in the construction of this ideological apparatus, which includes an increasing interest for the history and consequences of the material heritage of colonialism.⁵ In her recent book, Beatrice Falcucci stresses that museums are 'pervasive spaces where knowledge and collective memory are constructed' (9). She also highlights the fact that the problematic character of colonial collections, their provenance, exhibition, and possible restitution have attracted

¹ BARTOLOMÉ DE LAS CASAS, *Apologética historia sumaria* (Mexico: UNAM, 1967 [1536]), III, 264.

² 'Sooner than later, justice will be made. If it were otherwise, I would address the populace. I would say to them: "Peoples, your roars will make your masters tremble. What are you waiting for? For what moment do you reserve your torches and the stones that pave your streets? Throw them!"". GUILLAUME-THOMAS FRANÇOIS RAYNAL, *Histoire philosophique et politique des établissements et du commerce des Européens dans les deux Indes* (Geneva: Jean-Leonard Pellet, 1780), III, 9, 268. My translation.

³ FRANTZ FANON, *The Wretched of the Earth* (New York: Grove Press, 1963), 182.

⁴ EDWARD SAID, *Culture and Imperialism* (New York: Random House, 1994), 9.

⁵ See, for instance, DOMINIC THOMAS, ed., *Museums in Postcolonial Europe* (London: Routledge, 2010), or TIM BARRINGER AND TOM FLYNN, eds, *Colonialism and the Object* (London: Routledge, 2008).

increasing interest from scholars, both in Italy and in other countries. *L'impero nei musei* aims explicitly at understanding how Italian collections are part of this field. The author attempts to 'reconstruct the history of collections originating in colonies and occupied territories' (Eritrea, Somalia, Libya, Ethiopia), in order to understand how they arrived, who curated them, following which guidelines, and what was the role they played in the construction of an image of *oltremare* in the mainland.

Well acquainted with the ever-increasing historiography on these issues, both in Italy and in other countries, Falcucci structures her findings in an introduction and six chapters. The introduction functions more as a preface, stating the aims of the book. The first chapter ('La materialità dell'impero') is the true introduction to the issues at hand. Here, the author proposes that the objects under study were used to produce national and colonial identities, but also to forge institutions and professional careers inside and outside the university. She also explains the peculiarities of collecting objects in Africa as explored and subjugated by Italians, both before and after the formal institution of empire, as well as some of the characteristics of their exhibition: collections became not only devices for knowledge but also nation-building symbols, displaying the empire in the provinces.

The rest of the book is structured chronologically. Chapter II studies museums and collections during 'the first Liberal age'. Chapter III focuses on the acquisition of colonial objects in the early years of the twentieth century, dealing both with temporary and more stable exhibitions. Chapters IV and V are devoted to the analysis of Fascist policies regarding collection and exhibition of several types of goods linked to empire. The first one deals with colonial museums during Fascism, while the second is aimed at tackling the approach of the regime towards nature in the colonies. A short final chapter is devoted to the posthumous life of empire after the empire had formally ceased to exist: it deals with the conflictive survival of colonialism in public exhibits during the Italian Republic, after the Second World War.

Throughout the book, several subjects reappear more than once and are properly contextualised. Various approaches to objects coming from the colonies and knowledge related to them contributed to bring Africa closer to Italians. Those collections were often fragmentary, scattered all over the Italian peninsula, closely linked to local contexts. They were part of attempts to include the colonies within the interests and activities of different social agents. In some cases, local initiative prevailed. In others, particularly during Fascism, there was an attempt to force the incorporation of those enterprises within a national policy regarding empire. All this was true of diverse kinds of objects coming from the colonies: minerals, plants, animals, ethnographic objects of different types. Some were bought, others pillaged, others yet given as courtly or state gifts. They arrived to the institutions exhibiting them (societies, universities, museums) through donation or acquisition. According to Falcucci, in most cases, particularly in ethnographic collections, 'the objects that were gathered revealed the knowledge (or better, the bias) linked to them' (121): they say

less about Africa than about how Italians constructed several succeeding ideas of Africa. At the same time, they contributed to a popularisation of colonial exoticism.

L'impero nei musei could also be read as a contribution to the debates regarding continuity and discontinuity in Italian history, from the *Risorgimento* to the Republic. Some undertones seem to have been present throughout these periods: the idea that expansion towards Africa was in many ways a 'natural' extension of the unification of Italy, that the country exerted some sort of 'benevolent' domination from the Liberal age to the Fascist empire, enacting a 'civilising mission' that allowed for the extension of an ancient *civiltà* eagerly awaited by the African peoples who would welcome it. Nevertheless, the book also highlights two moments of Italian expansion, a first one that could be described as the colonial 'adventure' of local notable people and learned societies; a second one in which the Fascist colonial empire was showcased as something that would be profitable for all Italians and celebrated by them. The construction of knowledge and the lure of economic opportunity was important in both cases. But during the first period scientists and explorers attempted to convince others of the importance of having colonies, while during Fascism the regime promoted the need for everyone, scientists in particular, to be interested in colonies and empire building. As a consequence, museums acquired a double role: they were sites for science and also places of propaganda. Last but not least, the approach to African peoples was also made of continuity and change. During the Liberal age, an evolutionist paradigm to ethnography was framed through a serial typological approach, according to which Africans were 'contemporary primitives'.⁶ During Fascism, the promotion of racial policies from above transformed anthropological and ethnographic collections into 'the most active centres of racism' (195). Other signs of continuity were unintentional: while the Fascist regime attempted to transform and control the narrative of several local institutions displaying colonial objects, its ability to actually enforce those changes was in some cases limited and local actors continued to tell the stories as they were used to telling them.

L'impero nei musei is an important book. In dialogue with current global debates and with the latest findings in Italian historiography, it will probably become an integral part of both. Editorial constraints probably explain that a bibliography and a set of maps are not there, and I cannot help but notice that they would have been useful. Intellectually, there are a few questions that perhaps Falcucci will answer in her future research. Did the people of present-day Libya, Eritrea, Somalia and Ethiopia intervene in the creation of colonial collections? In which ways did they collaborate, resist, or found ways to tell a different story? How did these attitudes change in the long run, before, during, and after the formal existence of empire? Did at least a part of Africa make it through? In all the mass of objects, articles, books, exhibitions, texts and images spanning more than a century, were all the realities of the continent subsumed by colonial ideology and propaganda? The postcolonial hypothesis is that no real

⁶ On this, see the classic JOHANNES FABIAN, *Time and the Other* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1983).

knowledge slipped through the web of oppression. It follows that when we look at those objects we do not see Africa, but the colonial construction of the continent: people deprived of their humanity, nature conceived as pristine and Edenic, etc. I wonder whether it would be possible, and perhaps even anti-colonial, to read that fragmentary evidence ‘against the grain’ or ‘between the lines’.⁷ This could not only contribute to tracing the agency of the colonised, but also to discover what Italians during the Liberal, Fascist and Republican ages were unable or unwilling to see about the human and natural realities of Africa.

⁷ CARLO GINZBURG, ‘Unintentional Revelations: Reading History Against the Grain’, in *Exploring the Boundaries of Microhistory*, The Fu Ssu-nien Memorial Lectures, 2015 (Taipei: Institute of History and Philology, Academia Sinica, 2017), 41–81 (also published in *La lettera uccide*, Milan: Adelphi, 2021, 25–44).