

*The imperial illusion: reading Italian colonialism through heritage (1914-1960)*

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For the last forty years, scholarship on Italian colonialism has been polarised between historiographical issues of comparability with other European colonial systems and how Italian colonialism developed before and after the rise of the fascist regime. However, recent events around the removal of statues and contestation of colonial monuments in the public sphere have stressed the urgency for renegotiating contested pasts in the present and the key role of materiality. In Italy, while a memorial to a war criminal has been disputed, the treatment of the material culture of the colonised, the ideology underpinning initial collection and exhibition work, and the reproduction of these identities in contemporary museums has been largely overlooked. I argue that to comprehend the material practices of Italian colonialism, we must look at what triggered the post-colonial critique debate: the role of museum collections as expressions of colonial agency not only in their appropriation of cultural heritage but also as an ideological tool. Since museum collections continue to develop, the act of 'unpacking' such collections question the material and social assemblages through an interrogation of how they developed, their impact over time, and their contemporary role.

The research has explored to what extent colonial collections have been, and still are, active in forming networks among varied persons and groups, including communities/anthropologists/curators/auctioneers/museum administrators. As demonstrated by recent political protests, the impact of colonial collections goes beyond museum walls impacting contemporary life and processes of colonial and post-colonial governance, our perception of cultural diversity and the dynamics of how we relate to time/objects/place. The research looked at the formation, development and final closure of the Colonial Museum in Rome through archival records and exhibition catalogues. First established in 1914, the Museo Coloniale in Rome was opened by Benito Mussolini in 1923. After the conquest of Ethiopia and the proclamation of the Empire it became the Museum of Italian Africa in 1937. In the post war the museum was renamed African Museum in an attempt to still being relevant in light of the Italian protectorate over Somalia, but fell into neglect before closing permanently in 1972. The collection was then moved, first to the Italian Institute for Africa and the Far East (ISIAO), then the Museum of Oriental Art, before arriving in 2010 in the storeroom of the Ethnographic Museum 'L. Pigorini'. The key dates of the research are 1914, the date of the first colonial exhibition with materials coming directly from the Northern African colonies, and 1960, Somalia independence year which saw the end of Italian protectorate.