Metropole/Colony: Africa and Italy
An exhibition in the Wolfsonian Teaching Gallery at the Frost Art Museum
January 25 – April 15, 2012

Metropole/Colony: Africa and Italy examines the central role colonization of Africa played in shaping Italian national identity during the Fascist era (1922–1943). With the invasion of Ethiopia in 1935, Benito Mussolini launched an expansion of the Italian empire in East Africa beyond the territories already claimed by the previous regime between 1890 and 1922. Colonization was integral, rather than peripheral, to efforts by the government to forge a social and cultural consensus nationwide, and attracted enthusiastic participation by artists, writers, and corporate interests.

Drawn from the collection of The Wolfsonian–Florida International University, the exhibition explores how material and visual culture, ranging from children’s games to construction of new cities, reinforced the cultural connection between the metropole (the Italian mainland) and the African colonies of Libya, Ethiopia, Eritrea, and Somalia. Even as the Fascist state attempted to impose control over colonial territories, it also made parallel attempts to reorder Italy itself. In both colonies and metropole, the state undertook reclamation of land for farming, resettlement of populations, rebuilding of cities, and intensive promotion of agriculture and industry. These campaigns, carried out within an expanding, multi-national empire, powerfully shaped the modern sense of what it means to be Italian.

Metropole/Colony: Africa and Italy is organized by The Wolfsonian–Florida International University. We gratefully acknowledge the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation for its financial support of the project, and the Frost Art Museum for its generosity in making this gallery available for the exhibition. David Rifkind, Department of Architecture, FIU, curated the exhibition. We thank the following for their contributions: Maristella Casciato, Jennifer Hirsh, Stephanie Hom, Mia Fuller, Lucy Maulsby, and Michelangelo Sabatino.
Late-1930s master plans for Rome’s EUR (Esposizione Universale di Roma) and Addis Ababa exemplify Fascist aspirations for Italy’s new imperial cities. Accentuating straight, monumental roadways and suited to elegant aerial depictions, they were drawn up without taking topographical obstacles or existing constructions into account.

In Addis Ababa—the Ethiopian imperial capital and, after May 1936, the capital of Italian East Africa—carrying out the plan required displacing inhabitants and battling difficult terrain. Through segregation and austere monumental architecture, the plan was intended to make Italian supremacy clear to the colonized. Conversely, EUR brought the representation of Italy’s empire home to the metropole. Didactic exhibitions concerning Roman imperial antiquity and modern Italy’s colonies were planned for the 1942 opening, prevented by the Second World War. Unlike the plan for Addis Ababa, the one for EUR was completed in the postwar period—making it, paradoxically, the most successful Fascist project for an imperial city.

Written by Mia Fuller, University of California-Berkeley
**Poster, Roma 1942 – XX. Esposizione Universale.** [Rome 1942 – Year XX. Universal Exposition], 1939
Designed by Giorgio Quaroni (Italian, 1907–1960)
Published by Edizioni dell’Esposizione Universale
Commercial color lithograph
Loan, The Mitchell Wolfson, Jr. Study Centre, Miami, FL

Giorgio Quaroni's poster portrays the unrealized project for the Arco Imperiale (Imperial Arch), designed by architect Adalberto Libera and engineer Pier Luigi Nervi for the Universal Exposition in Rome. The arch would have marked the threshold between the monumental city and the Via Imperiale, which, as the road leading from Rome to the port of Ostia, was the symbolic link between the Italian capital and the country's trans-Mediterranean empire.

**Studies, Views of Italian Cities, ca. 1937**
- Genoa
- Trieste
- Addis Ababa
- Rome

Artist unknown
Gouache and graphite on paper

These paintings, possibly prepared as studies for a calendar or other printed material, each depict an Italian aircraft above a city identified by a single iconic structure. The juxtaposition of modern technology and historic architecture reflected the Fascist regime’s self-legitimizing claim of direct continuity with the nation’s historic patrimony. The paintings also recall a common gesture seen in Italian urban design during the 1930s, in which new buildings representing the state were sited in axial relationships with significant older buildings in order to reinforce this association. In addition, the church of Saint George in Addis Ababa is depicted here alongside the Colosseum in Rome and other monuments in metropolitan Italy, normalizing the absorption of Ethiopia into Italy’s Fascist empire.
Photographs, Construction of the Foro Mussolini, ca. 1932
Romolo Del Papa (Italian, dates unknown)
Rome
Gelatin silver prints

We must create, otherwise we will merely exploit our heritage. We must create a new art for our time, a Fascist art. Benito Mussolini, 1926

The Foro Mussolini in Rome is a vast recreation and education complex completed between 1928 and 1938 that embodies Mussolini’s mandate for Fascist art and his desire to build a Third Rome, even more impressive than the first two iterations. Enrico Del Debbio oversaw the master plan and designed a number of buildings and open-air spaces, all of which rethink classical precedents. The black-and-white photographs of the construction of the Fascist Academy of Physical Education and the Stadium of the Marble Statues, shown here, obscure the fact that the buildings were covered with red stucco so as to reveal ancient roots for modern, reinforced concrete buildings.

The monolith under construction in another photograph was dedicated to Mussolini in November 1932. This marble obelisk was placed in a plaza at the center of the Foro Mussolini, part of a strategy to revive collaboration between architects and artists, and to incorporate sculptures and decoration telling the story of Fascism in the buildings, plazas, and stadia of the complex.

Written by Michelangelo Sabatino, University of Houston
Posters, 1938

Radioviaggio nell’impero. La bonifica della terra
e degli uomini [Radio Journey in the Empire.
The Reclamation of Land and of People]
Labor, Industry, Commerce, Weapons]
Designed by Oreste Gasperini (Italian, dates unknown)
Published by Ente Radio Rurale
Printed by Tumminelli & C., Rome
Commercial color lithographs

Beginning in 1935, Italy's rural radio network produced a series of photomontage posters to enhance didactic radio broadcasts designed for schools that were remote from urban areas. The posters were offered free to the schools as a means of encouraging purchase of heavily subsidized radios.

As their titles boldly declare, the posters shown here were part of a two-day broadcast in 1938, meant to take children on a “Radio Voyage” around the Empire. Each of the posters highlights the Fascist effort to transform colonial territories and colonized peoples. The montage technique combines portraits of Italian leaders with photos documenting coffee and banana plantations, mining and processing natural resources, the building of roads and bridges, and a (seemingly) contented native population hard at work for the empire.

Written by Jennie Hirsh, Maryland Institute College of Art
CASE 2

*Book, Il Fascio primogenito* [The First-born Fascio], 1938
Printed by “Esperia,” Milan

*Ring, Oro alla patria* [Gold to the Fatherland], 1935
Maker unknown
Steel

*Postcards, ca. 1936*
Illustrations by Aurelio Bertiglia (Italian, 1891–1973)

*Game, La conquista dell’Abissinia* [Conquest of Abyssinia], 1936
Published by Carlo Erba, S.A., Milan

The war in Ethiopia provided an opportunity for the Fascist regime to implicate itself in every aspect of Italians’ lives. In response to international sanctions imposed after the 1935 invasion, the government asked men and women to donate their gold wedding rings to support the war effort. The steel band, offered as a replacement, gave the patriotic citizen physical proof of her or his "faith" in the nation and represented a personal relationship to the empire.

Like the maps Italian families were encouraged to hang on their walls in order to follow the army’s advances in East Africa, games like the one shown here enabled children to feel invested in the military conquest. The “civilizing mission” of colonialism, in which Italy claimed credit for abolishing slavery and improving living conditions in Ethiopia, is presented in a series of postcards in which children act as innocent allegorical figures representing their respective countries.
Italy’s Fascist regime promoted rapid development of agriculture and industry. The 1936 commemorative volume Italia imperiale included numerous essays linking economic activity in the metropole and colonies. Here, the Fiat manufacturing conglomerate advertised its role in the country’s domestic modernization and overseas military campaigns. The report of the national banana monopoly depicted Italian children giving the Fascist salute while eating bananas, as if consuming the fruit (grown in Somalia) were a form of imperial communion. The Banco di Roma produced postcards publicizing its branches throughout East Africa, further representing the colonies’ absorption into Italy’s empire.
Like grain, sugar was an important dietary staple whose domestic production was supplemented by colonial agriculture. Sugar refined in Somalia from locally grown cane significantly enhanced the supply of sugar made from beets in mainland Italy. The wartime poster *Consegnate all’ammasso il grano sacro alla vittoria della patria* reminds farmers of their duty to produce grain for military and civilian consumption, and lists prizes for exceeding quotas.
In both Italy and its colonies, public works provided the most tangible sign of the regime’s commitment to progress. Construction of cities and towns, development of transportation and communications infrastructure, and erection of buildings to house state and party agencies demonstrated the government’s ability to improve citizens’ lives and control its growing empire. Broadcast and print media (books, periodicals, posters, postcards, newsreels, and films) introduced these projects to people who were unable to see them firsthand—many of the photographs shown here became iconic images of Italy’s modernization. Road building and grain farming, especially, evoked the practices of imperial Rome, supporting the Fascist regime’s claim to continuity with the nation’s ancient patrimony.
Platter, *Amate il pane cuore della casa ... Mussolini* [Love Bread Heart of Home ...], 1928
Design attributed to Virgilio Retrosi (Italian, 1892–1975)
Tin-glazed earthenware
The Wolfsonian–FIU, The Mitchell Wolfson, Jr. Collection, 84.7.30

Platter, *San Giorgio Benito uccide il monstro delle sanzione* [St. George Benito Killing the Monster of Sanctions], 1936
Designed by Golia (Eugene Colmo; Italian, 1885–1967)
Ceramic

Visual and decorative arts brought the notion that grain production and consumption were patriotic acts into Italian homes and workplaces. The bread plate attributed to Virgilio Retrosi reproduces a verse in a poem published under Mussolini’s signature: “Love bread, heart of the home, scent of the table, joy of our homes.” The need to acquire new territory devoted to agriculture was one reason given for the invasion of Ethiopia. Italy’s aggression toward this League of Nations member led to international sanctions, which were portrayed on the platter shown here as a dragon slain by Mussolini in the role of Saint George (not coincidentally the patron saint of Ethiopia).

Sculpture, *La messe* [The Harvest], ca. 1927–28
Artist unknown
Cast bronze
The Wolfsonian–FIU, The Mitchell Wolfson, Jr. Collection, 84.6.3
Mussolini declared the “Battle for Grain” in 1925, insisting that the country had to eliminate costly grain imports by becoming agriculturally self-sufficient. Part of that campaign was land reclamation in the Pontine Marshes, south of Rome, and internal colonization by large numbers of unemployed Italians from the north who moved to new cities and hamlets in this region.

Italian artists produced many heroic representations of agricultural labor in the period. Antonio Leonardi’s painting depicts farmers as selfless, hard-working men who have made the land fertile in order to feed the nation. Their willingness to sacrifice is further shown by the young boy’s attire; he wears the uniform of the Balilla, a youth organization that prepared members for military service.

Print, *Seminatore* [The Sower], 1940
Renato Di Bosso (Italian, 1905–1982)
Lithograph
CASE 5

Book and case, Atto di fede [Act of Faith], 1937
Book printed by Economic Printing Service, New York
Case made by Anthony Plebiscito (dates unknown)

Postcards, ca. 1935
Published by Il Mattino d’Italia, Buenos Aires

The 1935 invasion of Ethiopia and ensuing declaration of empire fueled enthusiasm for Italy’s Fascist government among Italian emigrant populations in North and South America. Italian-Americans in New York and New Jersey funded the publication of Atto di fede to express pride in Italy’s recent accomplishments. The book, presented in a beautifully crafted wooden case, reproduces photographs from Italian propaganda publications and celebrates developments in both the colonies and the metropole. It emphasizes Italy’s “civilizing mission,” from vaccination of children and freeing of slaves in Ethiopia, to improvement of agriculture and hygiene through land reclamation in the colonies.

Painting, Prima crociera atlantica su Rio de Janeiro [First Atlantic Crossing above Rio de Janeiro], 1933
Alfredo Gauro Ambrosi (Italian, 1901–1945)
Verona, Italy
Oil on canvas
The Wolfsonian–FIU, The Mitchell Wolfson, Jr. Collection, 83.5.16

Aeropittura (literally “aerial-painting”) emerged from the Italian Futurist artists’ fascination with advanced technology, speed, and daring feats displaying individual courage. These qualities were also extolled by the Fascist regime, whose unprecedented trans-oceanic mass flights excited artists like Alfredo Ambrosi. The painting depicts the first such flight, in which Italo Balbo led a formation of twelve Savoia-Marchetti S.55 flying boats to Rio de Janeiro between December 1930 and January 1931.
Marcello Dudovich’s poster commemorates the flight of twenty-four seaplanes from Rome to Chicago in July 1933. The flight, timed to coincide with the Chicago world’s fair, was the second and last transatlantic flight organized by Italo Balbo, an early supporter of Fascism who founded the Italian air force, and would later serve as governor of Libya. Balbo staged the mass flights as demonstrations of technological prowess and military precision, two key tropes of Fascist rhetoric. As in the postcard illustrated by Luigi Martinati, shown in the adjacent case, the poster reinforces how the flights metaphorically shrank transcontinental distances to help Italians envision their country’s integration with the distant colonies of its Mediterranean and African empire.
Poster, *ALA littoria S.A. Roma. Linea dell'impero*  
[ALA Littoria S.A. Roma. The Imperial Line], 1937  
Designer unknown  
Printed by Editoriale Artistica, Milan  
Commercial color lithograph  

Poster, *Sitmar. Società Italiana di servizi marittimi*  
[Sitmar. Italian Society of Maritime Services], ca. 1930  
Designed by C. Simonetti (dates unknown)  
Commercial color lithograph  

Once Italy’s army had conquered new territory in Africa, travel companies quickly built networks of tourist facilities and services in the colonies, including hotels, flights, and cruises. By presenting the colonies as places of leisure travel, tourist advertising served to normalize their incorporation into metropolitan Italy. The travel routes shown on maps often echoed popular depictions of troop movements during the conquest of Ethiopia, allowing tourists to retrace these historic events.
Transportation afforded an important means of integrating the colonies and the Italian mainland into a single, cohesive empire. Fiat’s Littorina rail car began service in Italy in 1930, and soon afterward in Eritrea, where its iconic profile was frequently photographed at train stations that appeared identical to their counterparts in metropolitan Italy. When tourists traveled to the colonies aboard airplanes that
were civilian versions of military craft (such as the Savoia Marchetti SM 83 airliner shown here) they were able to imagine themselves in the role of conquering heroes.

**Plaque, Ente turistico alberghiero della Libia**
[Libyan Tourism and Hotel Association], ca. 1937
Aluminum
The Wolfsonian–FIU, The Mitchell Wolfson, Jr. Collection, 84.1.91

This aluminum seal shows the logo of the Libyan Tourism and Hotel Association [ETAL], the agency responsible for the tourism system within Italian colonial Libya. ETAL’s name is spelled out in a font common to many Fascist-era designs. In the center is a leaping gazelle, recalling the symbol of another Italian colony: the stag of Rhodes and the Dodecanese. Together, these animals complemented the master symbol of the Italian empire, the Roman she-wolf, which adorned colonial monuments alongside these local figurations. The six-pointed star in the sky would have evoked both Christian and Islamic iconography.

By foregrounding a minaret, a mosque, and a vernacular house represented in the Fascist style, the seal highlights the role of the built environment in the colonial project. Italian colonizers razed and rebuilt much of Libya’s urban landscape. By the late 1930s, Italian colonial architecture had become entirely an expression of Mussolini’s imperial ambitions.

*Written by Stephanie Malia Hom, University of Oklahoma*