

Beatrice Falcucci. *L'impero nei musei. Storie di collezioni coloniali italiane*. Pisa: Pacini, 2025. Pp. 377.

L'impero nei musei. Storie di collezioni coloniali italiane investigates the material heritage of Italian colonialism by analysing how artefacts from Italian African colonies were exhibited in Italian museums. The book analyses the collection of colonial objects, how they entered the museums, what purposes they served and how they were organized into displays. Through this focus, the study articulates a perspective on the relationship between Italy, Italians, and the colonies, tracing its development through the liberal and Fascist periods, and its survival after the empire.

Falcucci develops the introduction (“‘Altered Views’ e le eredità di colonialismi e imperialismi,” 9-19) and the first chapter (“La materialità dell’impero,” 20-43) to articulate an understanding of the Eurocentric system of knowledge as capable of distorting what it studies in colonial contexts, and how analysing these distortions helps us to know the colonizer rather than the colonized (9-10). Therefore, this investigation outlines how colonial museums disseminated the empire within Italy and articulates insights about the nature of the Italian empire and its impact on national identity (17). The book develops chronologically, the second chapter (“Musei e collezioni durante la prima età liberale,” 44-117) describes the first Italian missions in the Horn of Africa, how the explorers accumulated materials to demonstrate the success of their mission, and the role of societies, like the Società Geografica Italiana, in promoting colonial expansion and enhancing its material legacy. Nonetheless, as explored in the third chapter (“Il nuovo secolo e l’invasione della Libia: dalla “missione Eritrea” alla mostra di Genova,” 118-48), showcasing the colonies within Italian fairs became more professional only a few years after the Italian defeat in Adwa (1896), as the exhibit in Genoa (1914) demonstrates. This new attention peaked with the creation of the Italian Colonial Museum in Rome, inaugurated in 1923, and subjected to the Ministry of the Colonies, as it served as a propaganda platform for Italian colonialism (146-47). The book’s largest section, chapter four, (“I musei coloniali del fascismo,” 149-294) explores the Fascist period. First, this chapter analyses the Italian Colonial Museum of Rome, its history, collections, and role in involving the masses in colonial propaganda (151). This section also engages with the colonial societies and their activities, indicating how Fascism subjected their actions to the central government and how they worked to create discourses and myths to legitimize Italian imperialism (e.g., 184). Moreover, the chapter describes the widespread distribution of colonial artefacts through central and peripheral Italian museums, with a focus on the role of ethnographical and anthropological museums, which were particularly useful for the regime’s racial discourse, and the military ones. This analysis also investigates how various local museums about Risorgimento represented colonial expansion as a chapter of the national unification (291-92). The fifth chapter (“La natura dell’oltremare,” 295-348) focuses on the impact of colonialism on natural exhibits, mainly zoological, botanical, mineral, and tropical medicine. The regime emphasized the natural richness of the colonies to attract Italian investment in Libya and the Horn of Africa, glorified Italian labour as capable of transforming African soil (297), and supported its autarchic project. The last section (“L’impero nei musei tra passato e presente,” 349-75) explore the history of the collections after the empire’s end, and outline contemporary approaches to these collections, focusing on the projects developed in Milan, by the MUDEC, and in Rome, within the framework of the Museo delle Civiltà.

In recent years, the scholarship on Italian colonialism has featured a growing attention to the cultural production of the Italian empire (e.g., Gianmarco Mancosu, *Vedere l'impero, l'istituto luce e il colonialismo fascista*. Milano: Mimesis, 2022; Francesco Casales, *Raccontare l'Oltremare, storia del romanzo coloniale Italiano*. Firenze: Le Monnier, 2023), which also involved its material heritage (e.g., Carmen Belmonte and Laura Moure Cecchini, eds. Special Issue "Visual and Material Legacies of Fascist Colonialism Modern Italy." *Modern Italy* 27, 4, 2022; Beatrice Falcucci, "'The Issue of the Mediterranean and the Colonies Has Now Moved to the Forefront of Cultural Life': Curating Museums and Curating the Nation in Fascist Italy's Colonies." *Modern Italy* 25.4, 2020, 421-37); this book contributes to this focus by articulating a detailed genealogy of Italian colonial exhibits and museums, offering an insightful perspective on the colonies' impact on the metropole. To approach Italian colonial exhibits, this research considered more than a hundred museums, having to problematize the notion of what is a colonial object. To reflect the complexity of these collections, the author refers to them as also colonial (33), as they were often involved in heterogeneous exhibits. Building on this framework, Falcucci outlines the collections of objects, providing names, geographical and chronological data, and the moment of exhibition, identifying the institutions that hosted these artefacts, how they were displayed, and often, what happened to them after the empire's collapse. Through this genealogy, the book highlights the diffusion of colonial discourse, examining a network of peripheral museums across Italy to reveal the deep entanglement of local and colonial histories in various communities. (e.g., 268).

This research investigated a large and heterogeneous corpus of primary sources, formed mostly by various national and local archives, travelogues, memoirs, interviews, periodical publications and visual culture. The analysis of these sources engages with postcolonial theory, as it illuminates these objects' meanings, and what they demonstrated and supported within Italian colonial expansion, but also involves Museum studies, with reflection on the role of museums for national identities (26) and the strategies of showcasing. Thanks to these aspects, the book displays cataloguing and analysis qualities that make it a necessary starting point for future studies on the museum heritage of Italian colonialism. Alongside these elements, the book further develops a scholarly understanding of the relationship between science and imperialism, as it indicates how colonial discourse informed a specific epistemology in the colonies, outlining how Italian imperial culture impacted the construction and exhibition of scientific knowledge. Specifically, the text describes the process through which, within a scientific ambition, the colonised subject is fixated on a specific role and indicates how this fixation can serve different purposes within the colonial discourse.

To conclude, this work significantly advances the knowledge about Italian colonial culture. The book's impact unfolds at least in three directions: it provides a concrete understanding of how colonial expansion was represented as the continuity of the process of national unification; it indicates how, despite the organizational issues, the materiality of the Empire reached the Italian peripheries, cataloguing many of these projects, and it demonstrates the persistence of the museums after the empire. This last point is particularly significant, as it provides a nuanced understanding of the post-Fascist amnesia surrounding colonialism, demonstrating how these museums continued to preserve and transmit imperial memory through their collections well into the 1950s and 1960s (358), allowing for a further problematization of Italian colonial memory.

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