

MUSEUM OF OPACITIES #2

Colonial agricultures and architectures

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Introduction

Museum of Opacities is a project dedicated to the rehanging, and gradual return to the community, of the collections of the former Colonial Museum of Rome. Integrated into the MUCIV-Museum of Civilizations in 2017, these collections, which are currently being re-catalogued, comprise more than 12,000 works and documents that testify to Italy’s nearly century-long colonial history in Africa, from 1882 to 1960. Initially assembled to support colonial policy, this material has not been displayed since the Colonial Museum closed in 1971. MUCIV is thus engaging a diverse group of stakeholders in a participatory process of reflection. Each chapter focuses on specific themes, placing the historical collections in dialogue with contemporary research, interventions, and voices from the communities directly concerned. The second chapter, which follows the one that opened in 2023, examines the relationship between colonial agricultures and architectures. Drawing on archival documents, photographs, and artworks of the period, it explores the economic exploitation of human, environmental, and geological resources, as well as the use of art, in Italy’s colonial endeavors in Eritrea, Somalia, Libya, and Ethiopia. Particular importance is placed on photographic documentation of major colonial exhibitions held in Italy between 1914 and 1940. The research is further enriched by materials from the documentary holdings of the former Italian Institute for Africa and the Orient (IsIAO), which complement the display owing to a collaboration with the National

Central Library of Rome. The exhibition contextualizes the material on display within the broader history of Italian colonialism. Additionally, a parallel program of guided tours, educational activities, and public events offers further opportunities for reflection and discussion.

This chapter of the *Museum of Opacities* begins in the entrance hall of the Palace of Sciences with የካቲት ፲፩ - *Yekatit 12* by Jermay Michael Gabriel, a piece also featured in the first chapter. The work reproduces the staircase-shaped monument built in Addis Ababa during the colonial occupation, where each of the fourteen steps represented a year of the Fascist era, from 1922 until 1936—the year that marked the beginning of the Italian occupation of Ethiopia. The artist transforms the historical artifact into a monument to decolonization, atop which a video celebrating the independence of former Italian colonies is projected.

The connection between the past and the present also materializes in two additional installations in the entrance hall of the Palace of Sciences: *Rights to Seeds, Rights of Seeds* by Cooking Sections and *Entity of Decolonization: Ashes* by DAAR – Sandi Hilal and Alessandro Petti. The exhibition continues on the upper floor with works from the historical collections of the former Colonial Museum by the artists Domenico De Bernardi, Gariesus Gabret, Lorenzo Laurenzi, Giorgio Oprandi, Yohannes Tesemma and Giustino Varvelli, Teodoro Wolf Ferrari, and Yitbārak. The paintings are placed in dialogue with related documentation and artworks by Peter Friedl and Adelita Husni-Bey from MUCIV’s contemporary art collection.

The concept of “opacity” assumes a double meaning in the project. On the one hand, it refers to the national amnesia of the colonial era that renders its events, figures, and protagonists unknown. On the other hand, the project draws on the notion of opacity advanced by the poet and essayist Édouard Glissant (1928–2011), who declared it a right of every individual. In 1959, Glissant participated in the 2nd World Congress of Black Writers and Artists organized by the Italian Institute for Africa in Rome ¹. For Glissant, a fundamental figure in the development of decolonial thought, opacity is the right not to subject one’s identity for “acceptance,” but rather to share it

¹ The event was attended by 150 delegates, including prominent figures such as Frantz Fanon, Aimé Césaire, and Léopold Sédar Senghor, just months before 1960—the year that marks the beginning of African independence from colonial rule. Despite its significance, the congress was held in an atmosphere of institutional and public indifference, as attention was largely focused on the postwar economic boom in Italy and perhaps a desire to forget the country’s colonial past.

with others autonomously, on one's own terms. It is in this sense that these collections are now shared again, in all their historical complexity and regenerative potential. The *Museum of Opacities* is a space where to freely renegotiate the previous terms of history, propelling them from the past into the future, and to return the word to the voices previously excluded from the narrative of the former Colonial Museum. Opacity becomes a method not only to investigate the past but, more importantly, to ensure a future without *new* Colonial Museums. Instead, it advocates for shared spaces and times of encounter and conversation.

DAAR – SANDI HILAL AND ALESSANDRO PETTI

Entity of Decolonization: Ashes

On the occasion of the new chapter of *Museum of Opacities*, DAAR – Sandi Hilal and Alessandro Petti present a new installation titled *Ashes*, part of their ongoing project *Entity of Decolonization* and the outcome of a research fellowship conducted at MUCIV-Museum of Civilizations.

Entity of Decolonization started as a project to confront or question the legacy of the colonial period in Italian history. Since 2020, through a series of interventions at the former Ente di Colonizzazione del Latifondo Siciliano (Entity for the Colonization of the Sicilian Latifundium) in Carlentini (Province of Syracuse), the project has engaged both local and international participants in a process of critical reuse of the Borgo Rizza settlement. Built in 1940 under Fascism to colonize the Sicilian countryside, which was considered backward and unproductive at the time, the Borgo poses now a fundamental question: how can buildings from Italy's colonial history be reused in ways that respond to the urgencies of the present?

The work is based on one of DAAR's previous installation, conceived to expand the reflection on critical reuse and decolonization practices and which consists of a series of modular seating units developed by recomposing the facade of the former Ente di Colonizzazione del Latifondo Siciliano. These seats create a space to discuss the difficult heritage while imagining its possible future applications. In May 2024, a copy of the 2021 installation was burned in Carlentini in a collective, liberating ritual. The resulting ashes were collected in 18 amphorae, each intended to "fertilize" a new project. The second of these is *Entity of Decolonization: Ashes*, displayed in the entrance hall of the Palace of Sciences.² For this installation, DAAR reassembled two original display cases from the former Colonial Museum in Rome that were once used to exhibit objects taken during colonial occupations. The vitrines become a way to share a video illustrating the transformation of the Carlentini site from an Entity of colonization into an Entity of Decolonization. The installation shows how history can be reoriented toward new interpretations and shared forms of use.

² The first project was the founding of the Decolonization Board in Carlentini as a cultural association—a spontaneous collective formed to promote and support decolonial practices. One of the first initiatives was the decision to rename Borgo Rizza as Borgo EX.

COOKING SECTIONS

Rights to Seeds, Rights of Seeds

As part of the *Museum of Opacities*, the installation *Rights to Seeds, Rights of Seeds* by Cooking Sections is on display. Acquired through the *PAC-Plan for Contemporary Art* of the Italian Ministry of Culture, the work not only enters into dialogue with the collection of seeds and agricultural products from the former Colonial Museum of Rome—a selection of original jars is on display—but also connects the historical narrative with the urgencies of the present. Developed in collaboration with 40 farms and cooperatives in Puglia and Sicily— among the most arid regions in Italy—the work invites reflection on the importance of preserving the seeds of 125 varieties of heat- and drought-resistant Southern Italian vegetables.

These seeds, some of which are centuries old, embody generations of cultural heritage shaped by the ongoing efforts of farmers who have carefully selected, shared, and exchanged them across territories and communities. The installation becomes a tool for connecting the defense of biodiversity with the historical scenarios that once inspired the creation of the colonial “seed bank,” where seeds were extracted from colonized territories, particularly Eritrea, Somalia, and Libya, to reinforce an intensive agricultural system based on the development of monocultures. Within that system, only a limited number of seeds were chosen for the mass expansion of the Italian agricultural industry.

In Cooking Sections’ artwork, contemporary seeds are stored in ceramic jars that pay tribute to the traditional seed containers of Southern Italy. The seeds will be exchanged with others during two annual events—aligned with the sowing and harvest seasons—held at the Museum of Civilizations. Through this exchange, the museum becomes an active platform for the free circulation of seeds, a site of ecological and cultural repair that recognizes Italian agricultural heritage and traditional knowledge not merely as something to be preserved, but as a living resource to be sustained in the present.

The Historical Collections of the former Colonial Museum of Rome

The *Museum of Opacities* exhibition begins in the entrance hall of the Palace of Sciences and continues here on the first floor. This space also marks a new beginning: starting in 2026, the rooms on the ground floor will house the permanent reinstallation of the collections of colonial provenance held by MUCIV—Museum of Civilizations.

The colonial-era artworks and documents currently on view focus on the relationship between agriculture and architecture within the colonial context—the essential infrastructures underpinning colonial politics and economics. In particular, the exhibition explores the impact of agricultural economies, urban and rural settlement projects, and the development of water, electrical, and transportation infrastructures. Among the artworks from the historical collections of the former Colonial Museum are pieces by Domenico De Bernardi, Gariesus Gabret, Laurenzio Laurenzi, Giorgio Oprandi, Yohannes Tesamma and Giustino Varvelli, Teodoro Wolf Ferrari, and Yitbārak. These are shown in dialogue with two works from MUCIV’s contemporary art collection: *Tripoli* (2015), a sculpture by Peter Friedl, and *Montagna verde* (2011), a fabric map by Adelita Husni-Bey.

Layered imagery on the surrounding walls presents photographic documentation from major colonial exhibitions—national and international, artistic and commercial—that took place across Italy. These range from the *International Exhibition of the Navy and Maritime Hygiene* in Genoa in 1914 to the *First Triennial Exhibition of Italian Overseas Territories* in Naples in 1940, including additional events held in Rome, Milan, and Bari throughout this period. These images reveal the widespread dissemination of, and public engagement with, colonial projects across the country. The documentation of this extensive propaganda effort—of which the Colonial Museum was one (but not the only) driving force—challenges the persistent belief that Italians were largely unaware of what was happening in the occupied territories of Eritrea, Somalia, Libya, and Ethiopia. By juxtaposing these images with works by artists from Italian and the Horn of Africa, along with photographic dossiers and objects from colonial collections and exhibitions, the display fosters a deeper understanding of how colonial narratives were constructed and promoted. It also underscores the urgency today to reconstruct and collectively

reengage with the history of Italian colonialism through extensively documented and shared testimonies.

Further information

Extractive Activities during the Colonial Occupation in Libya, Eritrea, Somalia and Ethiopia

During Italy's colonial period, the country was involved in intensive extraction in its African territories, exploiting local natural resources to support its national economy. In **Libya**, the focus was initially on oil, salt, and iron ore. Despite technical and climatic difficulties, exploration began in both desert and coastal regions, supporting the idea of a "productive Libya" to be colonized and modernized.

In **Eritrea**, extraction played a strategic role starting in the late nineteenth century. Gold mines were developed in the Asmara and Dekemhare regions, along with salt and gypsum quarries. Investments were aimed at transforming Eritrea into a self-sustaining mining and agricultural center that could contribute to Italy's economic interests.

In **Somalia**, extraction was more limited. The main focus was on salt along the coast and the search for oil and natural gas, though these efforts yielded little success. Somalia was primarily considered an agricultural colony, producing bananas, cotton, and sugarcane for the Italian market.

In **Ethiopia**, following the 1936 occupation and the establishment of Italian East Africa, mining became a key instrument for consolidating colonial rule. Gold, platinum, iron, and coal were targeted, with numerous permits granted to Italian companies. However, logistical challenges, local resistance, and inadequate infrastructure limited development.

Italy's extractive activities in Africa transformed local landscapes and left a lasting material, environmental, and economic imprint, which is still visible today. GD

The Peasant Society in Late Nineteenth-Century Ethiopia

At the end of the nineteenth century, Ethiopia was a mosaic of rural societies, where daily life revolved around subsistence agriculture and pastoralism. Most of the population were peasants, organized into communities deeply connected to their land and family. Rural villages, composed of circular huts known as *tukul*, were set within an agricultural landscape of fields of grains such as teff, barley, millet, and wheat, often supplemented by family gardens and small plots of legumes.

Agricultural labor followed the rhythm of the seasons and rainfall patterns in an environment where the collective management of resources—such as water and pastures—was essential. Farming tools included wooden plows pulled by oxen and manual implements adapted to Ethiopia's varied climatic and geographical conditions.

The Ethiopian social system was shaped by intricate relationships of dependency and reciprocity, which also influenced land management. Land ownership varied regionally. In some areas, the *rest* system prevailed—a form of familial and communal landholding based on original occupation and hereditary transmission. This system permitted multiple individuals to hold rights to use and manage the same land, and such rights were considered inalienable. In other regions, the *gult* system was practiced, whereby land was granted by the emperor to nobles, imperial officials, or the Ethiopian Church in exchange for tribute or services. Introduced in the fourteenth century, this system included both permanent grants—such as those given to monasteries—and revocable ones awarded to nobles, who were expected to provide troops and support to the emperor if needed. Those who held land under the *gult* system could, in turn, demand tribute from the peasants working that land through the *rest* system. GD

Laurenzio Laurenzi and the Celebration of the “Charm” Radiating from Rome

A staunch supporter of the imperialist policies of the Fascist party, Laurenzio Laurenzi embarked in late 1930s on an extended journey through the territories surrounding the Mediterranean basin. His objective was to create a series of

etchings depicting the ancient vestiges of the Roman Empire.

Can these works be understood *solely* as historical visual documents?

According to a contemporary journalist, the etchings Laurenzi produced upon his return to Italy captured “all the charm of the civil and moral power that radiates from Rome onto the lands of the African shore.” This observation prompts a reflection on the choice of subjects: majestic monuments that bore witness to the grandeur and power of ancient Rome on African soil—and beyond. These structures served as visual counterparts to the rhetoric of reconquest, reinforcing the idea that the new Fascist Rome had not only a right but the *moral duty* to follow in the footsteps of its imperial predecessor.

Attention should also be given to a detail that, while seemingly technical, reveals Laurenzi’s ideological alignment with Fascist imperialism. In some works in the series, hidden within the fine hatching used to render detail and shading, one can spot political commentary or expressions of support for the regime. In the work on display, for instance, at the base of the arch’s pillars on the right, subtly hidden in the texture of the grass, an inscription reads: “ANXIOUS WORK DUE TO THE DANGER OF WAR, BUT ALWAYS STRONG ... FOR THE DUCE AND FOR THE FATHERLAND WE WILL DEFEAT EVERYONE AND EVERYTHING! LONG LIVE THE KING.”

These are not merely historical documents but visual materials imbued with propagandistic intent. In line with the principles of so-called colonial art, they likely played a key role in shaping colonial consciousness among the Italian public. MCL

How Should We View Paintings from Occupied and Colonized Countries?

The collection of Ethiopian and Eritrean paintings from the former Colonial Museum of Rome offers a valuable opportunity to study and contextualize the Italian gaze of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries—and to critically reassess it in the present.

This issue extends to all objects from the African continent that entered European museum collections in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. These works were long seen as part of a single, uniform, static, and “primitive” tradition when measured against European standards. Such prejudices denied African creative productions recognition as art, relegating them instead to anthropological artifacts—or worse, to exoticizing and racist interpretations. Ethiopian and Eritrean artistic production was not exempt from this interpretive framework. The painter Remo Fabbri reflected such views when he wrote: “The subjects are always religious and heroic, although in its—let’s call it evolution—Ethiopian art has never surpassed its embryonic state. Still, it has the merit of reminding us of the Byzantines. A primitive painting that for centuries stagnated, only to relapse into ever more barbaric expressions” (Remo Fabbri, “Abyssinian Painting,” *Etiopia* 1, no. 1 [1937]: 20–21).

Historical sources indicate that the paintings brought from the Horn of Africa to the Colonial Museum were used to support the war narrative of territorial conquest and were displayed alongside ethnographic objects. Yet they were not merely war trophies. The portraits of Italian generals painted by Eritrean artists—shaped by colonial expectations in both subject matter and style—illustrate how the act of domination extended into the act of creation.

It is therefore essential to ask critical questions and adopt a renewed perspective. This requires broadening the narratives to approach historical truth and to consider all the actors involved in the colonial encounter—where art, both Italian and Ethiopian or Eritrean, played a fundamental role. GTDC

Addis Ababa: The New Imperial Residence

The artist Yohannes Tesemma offers a portrait of an area that is of particular significance to Ethiopian history. In the nineteenth century, territorial control was contested among various local leaders—*negus* and *ras*—with the most powerful among them recognized as Emperor of Ethiopia, bearing the title *negus neghesti*, or “king of kings”—a *primus inter pares* who enjoyed greater prestige and whose privileges included the authority to designate the imperial capital.

Menelik II, formerly *ras* of the Shewa region, succeeded Yohannes IV of Tigray as *negus neghesti* of Ethiopia in 1889. As early as the 1870s, while still *ras*, he had been searching for a site to establish an urban center in line with his ambitions to renew and unify the country by centralizing power. Initially, the seat of his government was the city of Ankober—his birthplace and the former capital of Shewa.

Following the discovery of medieval ruins on Mount Entoto, Menelik chose the site for a military base, symbolically linking his reign to the glory of the great emperors of the past. However, the location proved unsuitable for a city due to its harsh climate conditions and limited access to water and timber. As a result, in 1886, settlements were moved further south to the area that would become Ethiopia's capital.

According to historical accounts, it was Queen Taytu, consort of Menelik II, who desired a residence near a thermal spring known as Filwoha. The setting was so promising that she decided to name the new settlement Addis Ababa, which means “new flower” in Amharic. Around the imperial residence—depicted in Tesemma's painting—numerous dwellings quickly emerged, and the population grew to around ten thousand during Menelik II's reign. Menelik made efforts to modernize the new capital, establishing a post office, a hospital, telephone and telegraph systems, banks, schools, hotels, restaurants, and cinemas. In 1917, four years after Menelik II's death, the Addis Ababa–Djibouti railway station was inaugurated—a milestone in the history of a city in continual growth. GTDC

The Travel Report: Giorgio Oprandi on the Eritrean Colony

Giorgio Oprandi published a travel report on Eritrea in the catalogue of the Eritrean Exhibition, held in 1927 at the Palazzo della Consulta in Rome—then the seat of the Ministry of the Colonies and the Colonial Museum. The exhibition, inaugurated under the high patronage of the Duchess of Aosta, featured approximately 150 paintings Oprandi produced across various regions of the Eritrean colony during a nearly yearlong journey.

Titled *My Eritrean Wandering*, Oprandi's travel notes provide insight into the context in which the artworks were produced, conveying the artist's emotional perspective as

well as his encounters with colonial authorities and local communities. His tone shifts between exoticized interpretations, patriotic nostalgia, and survival strategies.

Explaining the circumstances of his stay in Eritrea, he writes: “What matters to me is simply to tell, in a straightforward way, the visitors of my Eritrean paintings how it happened that I found myself one day in Eritrea with easel and palette, as if I were just outside my hometown in Lombardy; and the state of mind in which I produced about one hundred and fifty canvases, which reflect the many aspects of that interesting and still too little known colony of ours.”

From the report, we also learn that Oprandi was the first Italian painter to depict the Eritrean colony. He was accompanied by “a young travel companion, who also acted as an interpreter,” and they often joined other caravans. At one point, he and his companion became part of a group led by two Italian hunters, whom the painter described as such: “Two seasoned beast-catchers, who, with all due charm, had also ‘caught’ us—though we weren’t such wild beasts as to be unable to continue our Eritrean wanderings on our own. They had enticed us with a fantastic vision of the Setit lowlands, which they intended to explore by little-used routes in search of wild animals to bring back alive to Italy. After some natural hesitation, we followed them, atop our camels, with enthusiastic excitement.”

One night, Oprandi accidentally shot and wounded one of the “indigenous escorts” in the buttock—a mishap that prolonged his stay in Eritrea and led to a meeting with the colonial commissioner of Agordat and Jacopo Gasparini (1879–1941), the governor of Eritrea from 1923 to 1928. These encounters led to the organization of the exhibition in Rome. Oprandi describes the incident: “After a few days, just as I was leaving the caravan to head to Kassala and then continue on my own, following my personal itinerary, none other than the Commissioner of Agordat shows up to question me about the unfortunate gunshot. He already knows everything and first wants to see the injured man. He finds him recovering, but still clearly bearing the marks of the large pellets on his buttock, and that’s enough to prompt a brief but stern investigation. He immediately informs me that I may not leave the caravan until the matter is resolved.

“Very well. I will make amends for the unfortunate mistake. I’ll pay personally. That’s fair; and I resign myself to my fate. But then I got an idea. After showing him the

wounded man, I show the Commissioner my paintings. Brilliant idea. The Commissioner suddenly becomes more lenient. He absolves me of the innocent misfire—but on these conditions: I must compensate the victim and postpone my trip to Egypt, so I can meet with the Governor of Eritrea and, if possible, show him my paintings as well. I compensate the injured man, keep him with me as an assistant, and wait to cross paths with H.E. Gasparini.

“The wait is short. A few days later I met him. He too views my impressions, finds them interesting, and asks me to remain in Eritrea and continue my work as an illustrator until I’ve assembled enough material for an exhibition back home.”

For the full travel report in its Italian original, see:

<https://www.accademiadadini.it/wp-content/uploads/2022/09/1927-Oprandi.pdf>. RADL

Agricultural Colonization Plans in the Tessenei Plain in Eritrea: Exploitation and Impact

The Eritrean Colony, established by the Kingdom of Italy in 1880, was Italy’s first colonial territory. Initial agricultural policies, implemented between 1891 and 1896, aimed to transform Eritrea into a demographic colony, beginning with the exploitation of the Eritrean highlands. This region was intended to be used to settle Italian colonists. To facilitate this, the government requisitioned land already cultivated by local farmers, anticipating its redistribution to Italian settlers.

However, resistance from the local population, combined with the political and military repercussions of Italy’s defeat at the Battle of Adwa in 1896, led to a strategic shift. The governor of Eritrea, Ferdinando Martini (1841–1928), redirected focus to the colony’s flatlands, which were partially cultivated and inhabited by pastoralist populations. Unlike the highlands, these regions were seen as more suitable for industrial-scale agricultural exploitation. The climatic and hydrological conditions of the flatlands made them ideal for cultivating cotton—a highly sought-after crop for Italy’s textile industry. This project depended on harnessing the region’s seasonal waterways through the construction of dams and other hydraulic works to ensure a stable water supply.

In 1905, the Ministry of the Colonies commissioned the engineer Nicola Coletta to conduct a study along the Gash River. He identified the Tessenei Plain as the most promising site for a dam. However, the project remained unrealized until the 1920s, when Governor Jacopo Gasparini (in office from 1923 to 1928) revived the initiative. Gasparini incorporated the earlier liberal-era colonization plan into the broader framework of Fascist economic policies. The model of agricultural colonization in Somalia adopted by the Italian-Somali Agricultural Company (SAIS), which was considered a success at the time, served as inspiration.

The agricultural exploitation plan in Tessenei covered more than ten thousand hectares, with Sakellaridis cotton as the main crop. Production relied heavily on local labor. By 1929, approximately one thousand families—mostly from the Cunama and Beni Amer communities—had settled in the area. In 1931, the African Enterprise Company (SIA), founded and chaired by the former governor Gasparini, acquired the concession for the entire territory and its production chain. By the 1930s, the company was producing an annual output of 10,000 quintals of durum wheat and 6,000 quintals of cotton.

As recent studies have shown

(https://www.shs-conferences.org/articles/shsconf/pdf/2019/04/shsconf_modscapes2018_05002.pdf), the hydraulic infrastructure developed in the Tessenei Plain during the 1920s and 1930s profoundly altered the local landscape and demographics. Widespread deforestation and the subsequent reorganization of the land had a dramatic impact on traditional agricultural practices, production processes, local biodiversity, and social structures—including roles and activities within families.

RADL

More about: Cooking Sections, Rights to Seeds, Rights of Seeds

Rights to Seeds, Rights of Seeds (2025) by Cooking Sections was installed in dialogue with the collection of colonial seeds and agricultural products from the former Colonial Museum. Alongside the artwork, a dedicated display offers further context, including a selection of original jars containing the corresponding seeds. The artists' intervention aims to preserve a living and diverse collection of traditional seeds from Southern Italy, cultivated over generations and selected for their resistance to drought and heat stress. The installation stands in direct opposition to the ideas behind the creation of seed banks based on the extraction of seeds from the local agriculture of colonized territories (particularly in Eritrea, Somalia, and Libya), which were used to strengthen an intensive agricultural system focused on the development of monocultures from a limited number of selected seeds, aimed at scaling up the Italian agricultural industry. The installation thus acts as a form of cultural and natural reparation. It identifies the MUCIV – Museum of Civilizations as a place where Italian farmers practicing agroecology can deposit and exchange seeds preserved in the artwork during two annual events aligned with the sowing and harvest seasons. In doing so, it acknowledges the agricultural seed heritage of Italy as a resource to be preserved and kept alive in the present through active cultivation.

Founded in London in 2013 by Daniel Fernández Pascual and Alon Schwabe, Cooking Sections currently collaborates with around 40 farms and cooperatives in Southern Italy (mainly in Apulia and Sicily) to grow and preserve seeds of 125 traditional, climate-resilient, non-registered vegetable varieties. The seeds sent to the MUCIV – Museo delle Civiltà will be displayed before being periodically exchanged with new farmers by the end of spring. Initially, the seeds will be kept during their museum display in specially crafted ceramic jars, designed by Cooking Sections to preserve their germinability and pay homage to traditional Southern Italian seed containers, which symbolize the dried-out soils that these traditional varieties are able to endure. The ceramic jars used in the installation are also glazed with ashes made from seed and olive tree branch residues collected during the environmental catastrophe in Salento, where the spread of the *Xylella fastidiosa* bacterium since 2013 has severely damaged the region's monoculture of olive trees. Through its presentation in the museum and a carefully planned system of seed

circulation, the artwork facilitates the co-evolutionary nature of these seeds. This artistic performance is conceived as an act of exchange, fostering seed sharing and transforming the museum into an institution actively engaged in the concerns of civil society.

Cooking Sections' installation promotes the recognition of free adaptation and cultivation of low-water seeds as a key tool for agriculture in the age of climate crisis, and for the transmission of local agricultural knowledge to future generations. By building this expanding network of agroecological farms (now at 40), the project—launched in 2023—also invites broader reflection on nature's rights, particularly the rights of seeds, promoting the concept of promiscuous genealogies—free plant exchanges that allow phenotypes to express themselves without constraints, preserving the specificity of each variety without standardization.

In this sense, *Rights to Seeds, Rights of Seeds* is closely linked to CLIMAVORE, a platform that proposes new ways of thinking about our food systems and habits in the face of the climate crisis. The Museo delle Civiltà previously hosted the first *CLIMAVORE Assembly* in Rome from October 27–29, 2023, with the aim of building new alliances and mutual support between cultural and agricultural sectors. The event brought together an international network of museums committed to ecological transition programs in dialogue with policymakers, farmers, environmental activists, seed guardians, and chefs working to tackle the climate crisis through food and agroecology.

In light of repeated drought seasons and the collapse of monocultures, it is becoming increasingly essential to ensure the preservation, cultivation, and circulation of traditional seeds that can withstand rising temperatures and decreasing rainfall. The artists' choice to work in Sicily and Apulia is also linked to the fact that these are among the driest regions in Italy. Many small farmers there are giving up planting vegetables, yet these lands still host ancient seeds containing generations of cultural heritage—seeds that have been carefully selected, propagated, and exchanged over millennia. Despite increasing limitations, sharing practices have saved them from extinction and preserved their ability to adapt to unpredictable climates, stress, and disease.

Cooking Sections' installation—acquired by the MUCIV – Museum of Civilizations through the PAC2024 – Plan for Contemporary Art promoted by the Directorate General for Contemporary Creativity of the Italian Ministry of Culture—lays the groundwork for long-term collaboration between the museum and farmers. An annual “seed exchange” protocol has been signed, formalizing the museum’s custodianship of these non-registered seeds. These seeds remain free from ownership claims, patents, or commercial restrictions, circulating as a living collection for which the museum acts as a steward. With contributions from legal scholars and nature rights experts, the installation supports the development of new legislative frameworks that recognize seeds as ecological and cultural agents, rather than as commodities. In this way, the Museum of Civilizations becomes a civic platform for seed justice, connecting the custodianship of tangible and intangible heritage with environmental ethics and the co-evolution of humans, landscapes, and plants. Rather than being archived, these seeds are kept alive through cycles of cultivation, germination, and redistribution. This offers a regenerative approach to provenance and public collections, and aligns with projects like *Museum of Opacities* to critically and responsibly move beyond the era of colonial mass monocultures. ML

More about: DAAR – Sandi Hilal and Alessandro Petti, Entity of Decolonization: Ashes

DAAR – Sandi Hilal and Alessandro Petti, an art and architecture collective based in Palestine and Sweden, will present a new installation titled *Ashes*, part of their long-term project *Decolonization Agency*, which won the Golden Lion for Best National Participation at the 18th International Architecture Exhibition – Venice Biennale 2023. The *Entity of Decolonization* emerged as a project for all those who feel the need to critically question the difficult legacy of Italy's colonial and fascist past. Since 2020, through educational programs, research, artistic interventions, and public discussions at the former *Entity for the Colonization of the Sicilian Latifundium* in Carlentini, in the province of Syracuse, the project has involved universities, cultural centers, and local associations in the critical reuse of Borgo Rizza. Borgo Rizza, built in 1940 during the fascist regime to colonize the Sicilian countryside—deemed backward and unproductive—raises a central question today:

How can buildings constructed under fascism be reused without perpetuating its ideology, which still permeates our ways of thinking and acting?

After involving the local community of Carlentini in a series of public meetings on the critical reuse of Borgo Rizza, in 2021 DAAR produced an installation to expand the conversation to other places and subjects interested in decolonial and critical reuse practices. Starting from the decomposition and recomposition of the façade of the former Colonial Agency, DAAR created a modular bench-installation serving as a platform for discursive space. The public was invited to critically reflect on the social, political, and cultural effects of difficult heritage and to imagine new possible uses. This installation has been presented and activated in several cities and institutions: at the Mostra d'Oltremare and Museo Madre in Naples (2022), the Berlin Biennale (2022), La Loge in Brussels (2023), in the public space of Albissola Marina (2023), at MUCIV – Museo delle Civiltà in Rome (2023), where it is still on view, and at the Venice Architecture Biennale (2023). Following this extensive series of encounters and discussions—where the ghosts of Borgo Rizza met other colonial and modernist specters—a copy of the installation was burned in a cathartic and liberating ritual, and the ashes were collected in 18 amphorae meant to "fertilize" as many new projects. The first of these initiatives was the founding of the *Entity of Decolonization* as a cultural association in Carlentini, formed by a spontaneous union of individuals committed to promoting decolonial and anti-fascist practices.

The installation *Ashes* by DAAR, created as the final intervention of their Research Fellowship, reassembles into a new architectural form two original display cases from the former Colonial Museum. These cases were originally used to exhibit objects looted during colonial occupations—one still bears a bronze plaque inscribed with the word "Ethiopia". Their reuse transforms them into a device to show a video that emerges from a bed of ashes, illustrating the transformation from a colonial agency into a decolonial one, symbolized by the destruction of the replica of the façade. From these ashes, a new initiative is also born: the establishment, in collaboration with the MUCIV – Museum of Civilizations, of the first Award for the Critical Reuse of Difficult Heritage.

As DAAR's work demonstrates, Italy possesses a vast architectural and historical heritage produced during the colonial period (1882–1960), which has never

undergone a true process of decolonization. As a result, it is still common to see monuments, plaques, and place names referring to territories, events, and places colonized by Italy. The *Award for the Critical Reuse of Difficult Heritage* aims to recognize individuals and institutions that have been able to critically and consciously reuse such architecture and works, creating space for new narratives without perpetuating the classificatory and racist ideologies that originally shaped them. The inaugural prize will be awarded to the Municipality of Carlentini, in the province of Syracuse, for its courageous and critical support of the reuse of Borgo Rizza, established in 1940 by the *Agency for the Colonization of the Sicilian Latifundium*. Since 2020, the Municipality of Carlentini has generously made Borgo Rizza available to local and international actors for purposes completely different from its original intent. The former colonial agency has become a *Decolonization Agency*, the old post office a guesthouse, the school an exhibition space, and so on. The prize acknowledges the municipality's bold decision to embark on a path of critical reuse, one that does not erase the site's colonial origins but reorients them toward new goals. With this award, DAAR is launching a biennial prize, in collaboration with MUCIV – Museum of Civilizations, to celebrate projects that—through critical insight, imagination, and the capacity to reuse architecture and public space—show new transformative possibilities for difficult heritage, both in Italy and abroad. ML

Long captions

The Historical Collections of the former Colonial Museum of Rome

The Vestiges of Ancient Rome in Colonial Propaganda

In the political ambitions of both liberal and Fascist Italy, the colonial invasion of Libya was portrayed as a return—a reconquest of a territory deemed Italian because it had once been part of the Roman Empire: the so-called fourth shore of Roman dominions in the Mediterranean. This rhetoric relied on the presumed historical and cultural continuity that positioned contemporary Italy as the heir of ancient Rome. From this perspective, the archaeological remains of Roman origin found in Libyan territory became powerful tools for visual propaganda. In the halls of the Colonial Museum in Rome, this rhetoric was applied through the display of scale models of various Roman sites or monuments, including the Arch of Marcus Aurelius and Lucius Verus.

Erected in 183 CE to commemorate the Roman victories over the Parthians by Lucius Verus (brother of Emperor Marcus Aurelius), the four-sided triumphal arch was incorporated into the city of Tripoli over time. It became an integral part of the urban fabric, even housing commercial establishments such as a movie theater in the early 20th century. Following the Italian occupation in 1911, a program of archaeological recovery and monumentalization of Tripoli's Roman architecture began, altering the city's urban space. The Arch of Marcus Aurelius and Lucius Verus was subjected to an excavation campaign to recover its original layer, while the newer surrounding buildings were razed, isolating the building from the rest of the town. Historical and visual documentation of this transition, which ended in the 1930s, is provided by the two works exhibited here: the 1904 painting by Giustino Varvelli (late 19th–early 20th century), which depicts the building still immersed in the city context of the medina before the Italian occupation; and the 1935 painting by Lorenzo Laurenzi (1878–1943) showing the arch already isolated from the urban fabric and transformed into a monument—a material trace of the Roman past invoked by Italian colonial rhetoric in Libya. GD

Colonial Extractivism

The Italian presence in the occupied countries during the colonial period—Eritrea, Somalia, Tripolitania, Cyrenaica, Fezzan, and Ethiopia—was accompanied by the exploitation of the human and natural resources of these territories. The civilian populations worked as laborers to build up the economy and infrastructure, while large quantities of raw materials were extracted, exported, and refined in Italy. Indeed, it was in the colonial period that large-scale extractivism of materials exported from the African continent began, which was carried out without substantial benefit to local societies—a dynamic that continued into the postcolonial era, and whose consequences are still visible today.

Colonial fairs devoted considerable space to the commodity sector, displaying raw materials from occupied African territories alongside final products. These exhibitions were intended to encourage investments within Italian society while celebrating national commercial ventures and enterprises. The first collections of the Colonial Museum in Rome originated from the fair held at the *International Exposition of Navy and Marine Hygiene – Italian Colonial Exhibition*, organized in Genoa in 1914. A section of the Colonial Museum dedicated exclusively to the commodity sector was inaugurated in 1929.

After the occupation of Ethiopia and the proclamation of Italian East Africa in 1936, special attention was paid to geological research and the extraction of marble and minerals—including gold, rock salt, potash, quartz, and platinum—in response to autarkic measures taken in Italy. Several mining companies emerged, funded through both public initiatives and banks or steel and mechanical companies with Italian and occasionally international capital. During the colonial era, some of Italy's largest industrial groups invested and participated in mining and entrepreneurial activities in African territories occupied by Italy or other European countries. GD

Depictions of Colonial Power in Eritrea

Likely commissioned by an Italian patron, this painting foregrounds the governor of Eritrea, followed by an Italian officer and a group of *ascari* (Indigenous colonial troops) under his command, as they move among the local population. The artist is unknown.

In keeping with the traditional style of Ethiopian and Eritrean painting, the main figure—whom the artist wanted to highlight—was placed at the center of the composition and portrayed at a larger scale than the surrounding characters and elements. The intent was to symbolize the power of the colony’s governor—his authority and dominance over both the colonial military apparatus and the civilian population depicted to the left. The painter further underscores this with a caption written in Trigrinya: “*The population [who] greet, while they present petitions: some for land issues, some for pay, some [for] decisions.*” This is a scene of colonial administrative life that recounts customs related to land management. The prominence of the colonial system and apparatus of power may be further emphasized by the color of the governor’s horse—painted black rather than white. In the local pictorial tradition instead, white horses were usually depicted as the steeds of important personalities.

Finally, colonial rule is suggested by the architectural elements of the city, such as the buildings in the background of the painting. It is probably either Massawa or Asmara—the former the capital of the Eritrean colony from 1890 to 1897, the year the seat of government moved to the latter. The architecture portrayed predates the urban planning and building interventions that transformed both cities in the 1920s and 1930s. Among the buildings depicted are traditional dwellings (*hidmo*) and what appears to be a circular church, characteristic of Eritrean architecture. GD

Scenes of Peasant Life

At the time of the Italian occupation, Ethiopia’s economy was based on agriculture and livestock farming. Land was divided into vast plots owned by noble families loyal to the *negus* (“king,” from the Semitic root *ge’ez ngś*, “to rule”) and cultivated by the rural population, which included peasants and slaves. Agricultural products—grains, vegetables, fruits, legumes, sesame, and coffee—were largely intended for local consumption rather than commercial exploitation, which was extensive following the colonial occupation.

This painting, most likely made in Ethiopia—given the inscriptions in Amharic and Ge’ez—depicts subsistence farming. The composition follows the traditional format

of the *antikas*: paintings divided into registers that originally told mythical or religious stories and later included scenes of secular themes of daily life or the political sphere.

In the exhibited work, the narrative unfolds from top to bottom and reads from left to right, illustrating various aspects of peasant life in late 19th and early 20th century Ethiopia and accompanied by explanatory captions. In the first register, the subjects are “sower,” “overseeing budding crops,” “hoeing the weeds,” and “keeping birds at bay.” The second register depicts “he reaps,” “he carries the load,” “he threshes,” “he stores in leather sacks,” and “he feeds into the grain tank.” In the third register, particular attention is given to the different roles customarily attributed to men and women in the peasant society of the time: “she pulls from the tank,” “she grinds,” “she bakes bread,” “she draws water,” and “she heads home.” The final register features scenes captioned “he milks the cow,” “he warms himself by the fire,” “he eats supper,” and “he lies in bed” repeated twice.² At the center of the painting’s lower border, the artist’s signature appears: Yitbarārak. GD

Traditional Infrastructures

Accompanying and narrating events related to colonial invasion and rule, artists depicted the landscapes and inhabitants of the occupied territories. As part of a deliberate campaign to shape the visual representation of the colonies and construct colonial imagery for the Italian public, art became a tool of propaganda. Exhibitions of colonial art were organized, and the Colonial Museum in Rome featured a historical-artistic section that displayed mainly paintings and drawings set in Ethiopia, Eritrea, Somalia, Tripolitania, Cyrenaica, and Fezzan.

In 1924, at the recommendation of Emilio Del Bono, Vittorio Emanuele III invited Teodoro Wolf Ferrari (1878–1945) to Tripolitania, where the painter produced landscapes. His works also give representation to the elements with which the people of Tripolitania shaped, domesticated, and managed the territory before the construction of colonial infrastructure.

In *Old Well at Shara Shatt* (1925), Wolf Ferrari depicts a local structure built to supply water in the eponymous town near Tripoli—the site of a battle and

subsequent reprisal that occurred in 1911 during Italy's liberal-era colonial invasion. Traditional wells often appeared in images—photographs, postcards, drawings, paintings—of landscapes of Libya and North Africa that circulated in Italy and Europe. Products of local ingenuity and coexistence with the land, these wells were tools of subsistence based on an understanding of the subterranean water system. The well is the visual representation of the environmental knowledge and delicate ecological balance maintained by local societies. GD

Colonizing Action in Ethiopia: The “Apulia of Ethiopia” Entity

Following the Italian occupation campaign of Ethiopia (1935–36), Generals Pietro Badoglio and Rodolfo Graziani initiated the agricultural and demographic colonization of the newly conquered territories. In 1937, Benito Mussolini appointed Amedeo di Savoia Duca d'Aosta as Viceroy of Ethiopia. The following year, a campaign was planned involving newly created Regional Entities as well as institutions such as the Opera Nazionale Combattenti (ONC), which had experience with agrarian reclamation in Italy, like in the Pontine Marshes.

Among the first Regional Entities established was the “Apulia of Ethiopia” Entity, followed by “Romagna of Ethiopia” and “Veneto of Ethiopia”. Funded by the Banco di Napoli and the National Fascist Social Security Institute, the Apulia Entity launched a pilot project for intensive colonization in the Governorate of Harar, establishing the Comprensorio “Apulia of Ethiopia”. Between 1938 and 1939, a civilian village called “Bari d’Etiopia” (Bari of Ethiopia) was built, along with a series of colonial houses. Both projects were designed by the architect Saverio Dioguardi (1888–1961), who had previously carried out urban planning work in Bari and designed the ONC Ethiopia foundation villages Oletta and Biscioftù.

The urban center of Bari d’Etiopia was modeled on the ideal Italian village: a central square surrounded by civic and religious buildings, connected to a network of rural farmhouses in the surrounding countryside. In 1939, construction also began on road and water infrastructure—including an aqueduct and canals—which would allow for the exploitation and enhancement plan of the land. The first hundred settlers from Apulia arrived in the territory in February 1939. RADL

Giorgio Oprandi: Traveling Painter, Colonial Painter

Giorgio Oprandi (1883–1962) began his artistic training at the Tadini Academy in Lovere, continuing his studies at the Carrara Academy in Bergamo and later in Rome. A painter-traveler known for landscapes and portraits inspired by “Orientalist” themes, he was one of the most celebrated colonial painters of his time.

From the early 1920s to the early 1940s, Oprandi traveled and worked in several African countries and the Balkans. During a stay in Egypt, King Fu’ād I commissioned him to paint twelve decorative panels for the reception hall of his palace. As evidence of his success as a 'colonial' painter, his works were exhibited at the *Antwerp Colonial Art Exhibition* (1930), at the *First International Colonial Art Exhibition*, held in 1931 in Rome, at Palazzo delle Esposizioni—where an entire hall was dedicated to his work. His paintings were also on display, later, in the *Second International Colonial Art Exhibition* in Naples (1934).

Between 1925 and 1926, he visited Eritrea, Italy’s first colony, and in 1927 presented over 150 paintings made during his trip in a solo exhibition held at the Colonial Museum in Rome. The painting on display here depicts a forest of *doum* palms, a wild plant whose seeds, by the late 19th century, had become one of the first colonial products exported from Eritrea for use in Italy’s button industry.

Also exhibited in the halls of the former Colonial Museum were three additional paintings produced in Eritrea, including two depicting the reclamation works initiated by the Italians in the Tesseney Plain. This region of Eritrea was impacted by an agricultural development project which started in 1924 and focused on the intensive cultivation of cotton and the construction of water infrastructure, particularly the dam on the Gasc River.

Oprandi's works are interesting in understanding how these works were also invested with the task of rendering an image of the agricultural enhancement projects that characterized the colonial project during Fascism. Oprandi collected and disseminated visions of landscapes and panoramas shaped by Orientalist aesthetics, where the proliferation of activities related to colonization began to emerge. RADL

Agricultural Colonization in Cyrenaica: Genocide, Land Appropriation, and Exploitation of al-Jabal al-Akhḍar (Green Mountain)

The village of Luigi di Savoia was among the first settlements built by the Entity for the Colonization of Libya in the 1930s as part of a broader plan to seize and exploit the fertile lands of the *al-Jabal al-Akhḍar* (Green Mountain) region in Cyrenaica.

Established in 1932 as the Entity for the Colonization of Cyrenaica, the Entity adopted its final name in 1935 following the administrative unification of Tripolitania and Cyrenaica. It was overseen by the Ministry of the Colonies and the Commissioner for Migration and Internal Colonization and operated in coordination with the Public Works Office of Benghazi. Its headquarters were located in the city of Barqa (today El Merq), renamed Barce following the Italian military occupation in 1913.

Between 1933 and 1934, the first four villages were built by the Entity: Beda Littoria, Primavera, Luigi di Savoia, and Giovanni Berta. The names were chosen to evoke symbols of Fascism—for instance, Beda Littoria referenced one of the “new towns” founded during the reclamation of the Pontine Marshes—or honor figures considered important to the colonial enterprise, like Luigi di Savoia, nephew of King Victor Emmanuel II and founder of the Italo-Somali Agricultural Society in Somalia. Agricultural and demographic colonization activities began after the so-called reconquest of Libya (1928–32), a brutal campaign of repression against the Libyan anti-colonial resistance. In Cyrenaica, local populations were deported to 13 concentration camps built in the Sirtica region and south of Benghazi. It is estimated that sixty thousand Cyrenaicans died during this operation. The lands, seized and confiscated, were allocated to the new settlers. Some historians refer to these tragic events as the “Genocide of the Gebel” (Italian name for *al-Jabal al-Akhḍar*).

The process of demographic and agricultural colonization continued in the following years. In 1938, Italo Balbo, then governor of Libya, launched the Ventimila (Twenty Thousand), a plan to transfer Italian peasant families to Libya to establish 1,800 farms across Tripolitania and Cyrenaica. By 1940, thirty villages had been built, housing around one hundred thousand Italian settlers. RADL

Exploitation of Mineral Deposits in Ethiopia

The painting depicts a residential complex in a village built around an Italian mining concession in Ethiopia. Biographical information about the artist has not yet been found.

In 1905, the Piedmontese engineer Alberto Prasso obtained a concession from the emperor of Ethiopia, Menelik II, for the exploitation of mineral deposits in Jubdo, in the Birbir region. The extraction of platinum, gold, and other precious metals began in 1924 through the *Société Minière des Concessions Prasso en Abyssinie*, a company founded by Prasso with Italian and French capital. Following the Italian occupation of Ethiopia in 1935, Prasso was stripped of his concessions and sent into internal exile.

Starting in 1936, the development of Ethiopia's mineral resources was entrusted to various companies, including S.A.P.I.E. (Società Anonima per le Imprese Etiopiche), which operated in the western regions of the country. S.A.P.I.E. became the majority shareholder of both the Prasso company and the Italo-German Mining Company, following agreements between Italy and Germany. It thus controlled two concessions: one in the Uollega region, covering an area of 36,000 square kilometers, and the other in Beni Shangul, spanning 4,000 kilometers.

The company's extraction methods were militarized: each "column," a group of 35-40 men tasked with exploring a designated area, was escorted by *ascari* (Indigenous colonial troops) and coordinated by an engineer from the company's general management. In 1936, the Colonial Mining Service was established to plan the exploration of Ethiopia and other territories in Italian East Africa, while the Ethiopian Mining Company was tasked with surveying unexplored areas. RADL

Addis Ababa: The New Capital of Menelik II

The painting depicts a portion of Mount Entoto, a mountain located to the north of central Addis Ababa. Starting from 1886, Emperor Menelik II (1844-1916) decided to establish a new, large, modern capital there, initiating an extensive urban development plan.

At the top right of the painting, an inscription in Amharic reads: “The Imperial Palace of His Majesty Menelik.” Known for the Italians as the *Great Ghebbi*, the palace was built in 1886 as Menelik II’s residence; a few years later, it also became the seat of the imperial government. The artist, Yohannes Tasamma (1914/16–1972), depicted the building between two domed structures—likely Teaka Mariam Bahata (Church of Saint Mary) e Debre Mengist (Church of Saint Gabriel). The vegetation in the painting reflects the presence of non-native eucalyptus trees, planted by the emperor to reforest the area and address the need for timber. This type of vegetation continues to shape the city’s landscape today.

Following the Italian occupation of Ethiopia in 1935, new urban planning initiatives for Addis Ababa were launched. From the earliest plans in 1936, the guiding principle of urban transformation was racial segregation: to make space for the Italian district, local homes were expropriated and a new indigenous quarter for Ethiopians was planned. The final plan, drafted in 1938 by the architects Cesare Valle and Ignazio Guidi (and only partially implemented), aimed to shift the political and civic center of the city from Mount Entoto to the area near the railway station, where a European-style district, known as Piazza, would be established. The plan also included the construction of a new road network, an aqueduct, and a series of civic and religious buildings. RADL

The former Colonial Museum of Rome

The materials here were part of the communicative and informative apparatus along the exhibition route of the former Colonial Museum of Rome, inaugurated by Benito Mussolini in 1923 in Palazzo della Consulta, headquarters of the Ministry of the Colonies.

Established for purposes of propaganda, it displayed objects taken from Italy’s colonies in Libya, Eritrea, and Somalia that had previously been publicly presented only at various colonial exhibitions and fairs. The Museum moved to via Aldrovandi in 1934 and was renamed Museum of Italian Africa in 1940. Closed for inventory in 1938, it reopened in 1947, the year Italy formally renounced its colonies with the exception of the trusteeship in Somalia. The museum closed permanently in the early 1970s.

By 1953, the collections had been transferred to the Italian Institute for Africa under the supervision of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. Moved to the Ministry of Culture in 2017, the collections of the former Colonial Museum including some 12,000 specimens produced or looted during the Italian colonial experience in Africa are now part of the MUCIV-Museum of Civilizations and currently undergoing re-cataloging. GD-RADL

The Trade Show (Mostra Campionaria) of the Former Colonial Museum of Rome: Mapping Colonial Agricultural Practices

This display presents ongoing research into agricultural products connected to extractive practices and colonization strategies in Eritrea, Somalia, Cyrenaica, Tripolitania, Fezzan, and Ethiopia during the Italian colonial period. The materials on view are selected from a larger collection of approximately two thousand botanical, mineral, zoological samples, as well as raw or processed commercial products, originally exhibited in the Trade Show (Mostra Campionaria) section of the former Colonial Museum of Rome and various colonial exhibitions of the early 20th century.

The Trade Show was established in 1929 to justify colonial conquests, promote trade, and support the development of industrial and agricultural supply chains in both Italy and its colonies. Its collection is a material documentation of the exploitation of labor and plundering of natural resources that characterized agriculture in the colonized territories. On display are seeds, fruits, fibers, oils, and other plant-based samples from the commercial goods section of the former Colonial Museum. These items will be periodically rotated, following the activation of the Rights to Seeds, Rights of Seeds intervention by Cooking Sections.

The display begins with a focus on the Villaggio Duca degli Abruzzi in Somalia and the Italian-Somali Agricultural Company (SAIS). Additional research and insights are available through an interactive multimedia station. The museum's historical collections are a starting point for mapping agricultural practices in Italy's former colonies—tracing how colonial policies and economies of the liberal and fascist periods led to the founding of new colonial agricultural settlements, the construction of infrastructure, and the transformation of local ecosystems. RADL

The Conquest of the Jalo Oasis and the “Pacification” of Libya

This painting depicts the occupation of the Jalo Oasis in Cyrenaica on February 26, 1928, part of a broader military campaign known as the Conquest of the Oases along the 29th Parallel, carried out by Italian forces between January and May 1928. These operations led to the occupation of a string of oases—Giofra, Zella, Marada, Augila, and Jalo—located along the 29th parallel north that would unify the colonies of Tripolitania and Cyrenaica and consolidate Italy’s political and military control over Libya.

The painting is signed in the lower center by Gariesus Gabriet, an Eritrean *ascaro* who served in the Eritrean battalions of the Italian colonial troops operating in Libya under the command of Colonel Pietro Maletti. The artwork represents an alternative, internal perspective on the colonial military operations, detailing a pivotal episode in the “reconquest of Libya” (1928–1932). This period marked Italy’s domination of Libya through the suppression of anti-colonial resistance, the establishment of a unified colonial administration, and the launch of agricultural, demographic, and commercial colonization.

A typewritten label affixed to the back of the painting—added later—reads: *“In his imagination, the ‘painter’ (Eritrean ascario Gariesus Gabriet) wished to depict our peaceful occupation of the Oasis of Jalo (Cyrenaica, 1928), under the command of then-General Ottorino Mezzetti, Commander of the Troops (he’s the one on the white horse). According to the painter, then-Captain Lorenzini, commander of the armored car squadron, is the bearded one!”*

The iconography and techniques of the work diverge from traditional Ethiopian and Eritrean artistic conventions. Gabriet’s use of perspective, color, and figural representation, as seen in the portrayal of the human and the horse, reveals the influence of European artistic techniques and representational styles. RADL

Contemporary Arts and Cultures Collections

DAAR – Sandi Hilal and Alessandro Petti, *Entity of Decolonization: Ashes*

Ashes is a new phase of the ongoing project *Entity of Decolonization*. It emerges—quite literally—from the ashes of a copy of *Entity of Decolonization* (2022), an installation by DAAR (Decolonizing Architecture Art Residency), a collective founded by Sandi Hilal and Alessandro Petti in 2007, based between Palestine and Sweden. The original installation was exhibited on the terrace of the Palace of Sciences at MUCIV – Museum of Civilizations. In May 2024, the replica was burned during a collective ritual at the former Entity for the Colonization of the Sicilian Latifundium in Carlentini (Province of Syracuse). The resulting ashes are now contained in eighteen amphorae, each intended to “fertilize” a new project. This approach continues the reflections initiated by *Entity of Decolonization*, critically engaging with the legacy of difficult heritage—fascist, colonial, and modernist—and exploring the collective imagination of new possible applications and interpretations of these histories. For *Ashes*, DAAR has reassembled two display cases from the former Colonial Museum of Rome, subverting their original function of displaying products of colonialism. The vitrines have been transformed into a device for sharing a video that illustrates the transformation of the colonial entity into a decolonization entity.

As DAAR’s work demonstrates, Italy contains a significant architectural heritage from the colonial period (1882–1960), much of which has yet to undergo a conscious decolonization process. Thus, from the ashes, another initiative is born: the Prize for the Critical Reuse of Difficult Heritage, a new collaboration between DAAR and the Museum of Civilizations. The inaugural award was granted to the Municipality of Carlentini in recognition of its support for the reuse of Borgo Rizza colonial structures. Together, DAAR and the Museum aim to recognize the value of individuals and projects that reorient this difficult heritage toward new interpretations and uses to generate further shared, transformative possibilities. ML

Cooking Sections, Rights to Seeds, Rights of Seeds

The project *Rights to Seeds, Rights of Seeds* responds to the collection of seeds and agricultural products from the former Colonial Museum of Rome presented within the

exhibition *Museum of Opacities #2: Colonial agricultures and architectures*. This project by Cooking Sections—a London-based collective founded by Daniel Fernández Pascual and Alon Schwabe in 2013—preserves seeds from 125 different varieties of vegetables from Southern Italy that are particularly resilient to rising temperatures and drought. Stored in ceramic jars inspired by traditional Southern Italian seed containers, the seeds have glazed with the ashes collected from the remains of seeds and the branches of olive trees affected by *Xylella fastidiosa*, a bacterium that has devastated olive monocultures in southern Puglia. Twice a year—during sowing and harvesting seasons—farmers are invited to bring additional seeds to MUCIV to exchange with those in the jars. This transforms the museum into an active space for the free circulation of these seed varieties.

With the goal of establishing a long-term collaboration with the network of farmers who preserve these seeds, the Museum has signed a “seed exchange protocol” that formalizes the guardianship of these unregistered seeds to protect them from ownership claims, patents, and commercial restrictions. Thus, Cooking Sections’ intervention also invites broader reflection on the implications of the “rights of nature,” beginning with the seeds themselves. These seeds remain unowned and uncommodified, circulating within a living collection guaranteed by the Museum of Civilizations. ML

Adelita Husni-Bey, La Montagna Verde

The large fabric map displayed on the wall depicts the al-Jabal al-Akhdar plateau (الجبيل الأخضر), or Green Mountain) in the Cyrenaica region of Libya. This area was the site of numerous conflicts during the Italian colonial occupation, which lasted from 1912 to 1943. It is also a place of personal significance for the Italian Libyan artist Adelita Husni-Bey (b. 1985, Milan; lives and works between Bologna and Modica). For *La Montagna Verde (The Green Mountain)*, the artist retrieved a military map from the archives of the Geographical Institute in Paris, which she stripped of its colonial designations, leaving visible only the archaeological sites, water sources,

and oases. She printed this revised map on fabric that resembles the cloths she and her family would lie in the grass on during childhood visits to al-Jabal al-Akhdar.

The artwork converses with the nearby relief model of the Luigi di Savoia Center, one of several colonial agricultural villages built in the region. These settlements disrupted centuries-old harmonious relationships between local communities and the natural environment, which start to reemerge through Husni-Bey's removal of imposed features from the fabric print. With the same intention of freeing the land from the colonial gaze that forced an identity upon it, the artist splits a historical photograph—an image originally created to satisfy European orientalist aesthetics—and balances its two halves on a stone collected from the region. This same landscape served as refuge for Libyan resistance fighters, including during the 1969 coup d'état that brought Mu' ammar Gaddhafi to power. The intertwining of the artist's personal memories—which inspired these two works—with the displayed objects forms a counter-narrative of resistance to the various forms of domination to which Libya has been subjected, and whose consequences the country is still suffering from. ML

Peter Friedl, *Tripoli*

In his 2009 essay “Secret Modernity,” the artist Peter Friedl (b. Oberneukirchen, 1960; lives and works in Berlin) explores the historical links of Italian colonialism from the late nineteenth century to twentieth-century futurism, modernist and rationalist architectural theory, and neorealist cinema. Friedl incorporated reflections of writers such as Pier Paolo Pasolini on the continuity between “archaeological” or “traditional” fascism and the consumer society of his time. In *Tripoli*, Friedl materializes a never-built architectural project originally designed for the Libyan capital during the Italian occupation. The design, by the architect Carlo Enrico Rava—who, in 1926, cofounded the collective Gruppo 7 alongside Giuseppe Terragni, which sought to merge the rationalist principles of modernism with Mediterranean classical traditions—was intended to house the Tripoli headquarters

of the FIAT automobile company. Rava's proposal combined elements of local Libyan architecture and the modernist language of Gruppo 7.

By giving form to this unrealized structure, Friedl reveals the ideological framework that links modernist aesthetics, industrialization, and extractive economies with colonialism, while highlighting the complicity of Italian industry in sustaining colonial occupation. In *Costruire Colonia*, Terragni declared: "The first and most important principle of urban planning is the separation of colonial architecture into two parts, with the natives on one side and the whites on the other."

Friedl's model of a building that was never constructed invites reflection on the impossibility of separating the aesthetic forms of architecture from their historical motivations. This inquiry resonates with Rome's EUR district, where the Museum is located. ML

Jermay Michael Gabriel, የካቲት ፲፯ - *Yekatit 12*

The title የካቲት ፲፯ – *Yekatit 12* (February 19 in the Ethiopian calendar) refers to the massacre of Addis Ababa, which took place between February 19 and 21, 1937. The slaughter was carried out by Italian forces as a brutal retribution for the attempted assassination of the viceroy of Ethiopia, Rodolfo Graziani, by two Ethiopian resistance fighters, Abraham Deboch and Mogus Asghedom, who opposed the Italian occupation. Historians estimate that approximately 19,000 Ethiopians were killed during the massacre.

The artwork is a formal reproduction, reduced to its most essential elements, of a stair-shaped monument commissioned in Addis Ababa by Benito Mussolini and Graziani to commemorate the events of 1937. Each of the monument's fourteen steps represented a year of the Fascist era, from 1922 to 1936—the latter also marking the beginning of Italy's occupation of Ethiopia. On May 5, 1941, the occupation ended: Emperor Haile Selassie returned from exile and placed the Lion of Judah—the dynastic symbol of the Ethiopian Empire—on the top step of the staircase, a gesture of reclamation. The artist Jermay Michael Gabriel (b. Addis

Ababa, 1997; lives and works between Milan and Lisbon) renews this gesture by placing the monument within the Palace of Sciences and re-signifying it as a decolonial device. The work projects period propaganda alongside radio broadcasts announcing the independence of the Horn of Africa from Italian colonial rule. ML