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**MANAGING AND REFRAMING
COLONIAL COLLECTIONS**

**THE CURATORIAL EVOLUTION OF
MUSEO DELLE CIVILTÀ IN ROME**

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*A special acknowledgment goes to the curatorial team of Museo delle Opacità:
Gaia Delpino, Rosa Anna Di Lella and Matteo Lucchetti.*

*Their openness and engagement embodies the spirit of a reimagined institution,
one where even the most difficult histories can become a
shared ground for collaborative dialogue.*

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INTRODUCTION

This thesis provides a critical examination of the decolonization processes within Italian museums, utilizing the *Museo delle Civiltà* (MuCiv) in Rome's EUR district as its central case study. The inquiry focuses on the 2022 integration of the collection from the former Colonial Museum, an event that has become a focal point in the national discourse surrounding Italy's long-suppressed imperial history.

The research begins by grounding the topic in its theoretical foundations, tracing the origins of Italian colonialism and the evolution of its museographical transposition to highlight how the original *Museo Coloniale*, established in the 1920s, functioned as a tool for Fascist propaganda designed to glorify imperial conquest. This historical analysis is juxtaposed with the current legal and normative framework, specifically regarding the themes of restitution and repatriation. Evaluating the impact of international instruments, such as the 1970 UNESCO Convention, alongside recent domestic developments, has been central for proper contextualization. The study highlights the absence of *ad-hoc* legislation persisting in Italy, which has necessitated a 'bottom-up' specialized approach where museums act as independent agents of ethical reform.

The core of the thesis is built upon a qualitative methodology that prioritizes direct engagement with the material and institutional realities of *Museo delle Civiltà*. This approach is enriched by an assessment of historical records, an analysis of the collections' physical and ideological journeys, and a detailed evaluation of the current display model surrounding the theme of 'Opacity' and the critical dialogue with contemporary art installation. The research has been furthermore informed by direct site visits in January 2026 and a formal confrontation with Rosa Anna Di Lella, one of MuCiv's curators, allowing for a clear exploration of the tensions between national heritage preservation and the implementation of reparative practices. Ultimately, the research examines the museum's role as a 'contact zone', evaluating its potential to serve as a laboratory for social repair, regarding source and diaspora communities, and a didactic platform for civic and historic education.

CHAPTER 1)

THE CHALLENGES OF CONTEMPORARY MUSEOLOGY: DECOLONIZATION AT THE CENTER OF THE DEBATE

1.1)

DECOLONIZATION OF CULTURAL HERITAGE: A THEORETICAL INTRODUCTION

In an era defined by critical self-reflection and a growing collective demand for social justice, contemporary museums are increasingly scrutinized for their role as representative systems of the present. To evolve into equitable spaces, museums must first embark on a rigorous confrontation with the histories and power structures that established them. This journey begins with the recognition of a foundational truth: museums have never been neutral. Their current operation is, in fact, an expression of specific ideologies, rooted in colonial, patriarchal, and white-centric perspectives, dictated whose art was valuable, whose history was preserved, and whose voice was silenced. While conversations about the macro-theme of colonialism had existed, the formal establishment of postcolonial studies can be considered a relatively recent development in academia. Starting from the late 1970s, de/post/anti-colonial studies began to gradually achieve a formal institutional recognition within the humanities. This shift was pivotal, moving the conversation beyond simple historical or political accounts of decolonization to embrace an interdisciplinary cultural analysis¹. As noted by scholars such as Lyons, Parreñas, and Tamarkin, this multidisciplinary approach is central for maintaining the evolution of the debate, since dismantling colonialism, imperialism, and white patriarchal supremacy demands «many languages and vocabularies»². It is therefore essential to provide an introductory theoretical framework on the scientific terminology and

¹ A. Quayson, *What is postcolonial literature?*.

<<https://www.thebritishacademy.ac.uk/blog/what-is-postcolonial-literature/>> (2020) (Last accessed: 22.02.2026).

² L. A. Hiraide, *Postcolonial, Decolonial, Anti-Colonial: Does it Matter?*, «*New Voice in Postcolonial Studies*», 2021, p. 15.

the academic interconnections within this field, beginning on the terms used in the literature, consisting in de/post/anti-colonialism.

The term 'postcolonial' tends to be most associated with cultural studies, specifically, the 'post' refers to a sense of the past used for describing the period after the achievement of national sovereignty for multiple former colonies. The term's scope is equally concerned with conditions that existed under colonialism and imperialism, so it is clear that it is not universally applicable even as a temporal marker, since many communities still do live under the direct domination of the descendants of European settlers³. As articulated by foundational scholars like Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths, and Helen Tiffin in their seminal work *Post-Colonial Studies*, this term has to be considered as a «process of revealing and dismantling colonialist power in all its forms» including the ones «that remain even after political independence is achieved»⁴. Postcolonialism can then be understood as a critical engagement with the enduring effects of colonialism, examining its legacies on both a local and global scale, further exploring how concepts of race, gender, and place have been shaped by imperial Europe.

A political connotation is, instead, communicated by the term 'anti-colonial', in which the prefix 'anti' evokes an explicit tone of opposition and resistance defined by challenging the violence inflicted by colonial rule⁵.

Finally, the term 'decolonial' focuses on interrogating the production of knowledge and is largely associated with the Latin American school of decoloniality⁶. While traditional definitions have presented decolonization as a simplistic political process where colonies gain independence, this view is widely considered to be reductive. The key distinction lies in the prefix 'de' which positions decolonization as a continuous, reiterative process.

In this academic debate, the relationship between Postcolonial studies and Museum studies is inextricably linked, the museum itself being a product of colonial narratives. While one is a field of academic inquiry and the other a professional discipline, they share a central, critical concern: the legacies of empire and their enduring impact on culture, knowledge, and representation. It is for this specific reason that, in the 1970s, the museum institution started to undergo a similar transformation, largely catalyzed by the Institutional Critique movement. This period was marked by provocative artistic practices that questioned the curatorial

³ Quayson, *What is postcolonial literature?...*, cit.

⁴ B. Ashcroft, G. Griffiths, H. Tiffin, *Post-Colonial Studies. The Key Concepts*, Abingdon-New York: Routledge, 2007, p. 56.

⁵ Hiraide, *Postcolonial, Decolonial, Anti-Colonial...*, cit., p. 13.

⁶ *Ibidem*.

authority, exhibition design, and the role art institutions play in shaping different cultural narratives.

A representative example can be found in Marcel Broodthaers performance, *Musée d'Art Moderne, Département des Aigles* (Museum of Modern Art, Department of Eagles), which operated from 1968 to 1972 (Fig. 1,2). The fictitious institution mimicked the formal trappings of a real museum⁷. Instead of exhibiting original masterpieces, the installations featured empty display cases, wall texts with linguistic games, and a vast collection of objects bearing the image of the eagle, or a tag stating, "This is not a work of art". This performance served to expose the arbitrary nature of museum classification and the way institutions assert an objective authority to assign value, effectively transforming narratives into dogma⁸.



Fig. 1

Marcel Broodthaers, *Musée d'Art Moderne, Département des Aigles*, Brussels, 1968⁹.

⁷ MoMa, Marcel Broodthaers. *Musée d'Art Moderne, Département des Aigles, Section Publicité, 1972*. <<https://www.moma.org/audio/playlist/25/463#:~:text=At%20this%20point%2C%20you%20must.Spirit%20of%20conquest>> (2016) (Last accessed: 22.02.2026).

⁸ A. La Vela, *Marcel Broodthaers: The Fictional Museum That Told the Truth*, in «Medium». <<https://medium.com/@lavela.antonino/marcel-broodthaers-the-fictional-museum-that-told-the-truth-ab385280a849>> (2025) (Last accessed: 22.02.2026).

⁹ Image source: <<https://www.wikiart.org/en/marcel-broodthaers/museum-of-modern-art-department-of-eagles-1968>> (Last accessed: 22.02.2026).



Fig. 2

Marcel Broodthaers, *Musée d'Art Moderne, Département des Aigles*, Brussels, 1968¹⁰.

The discourse on institutional reform of imperialism intensified in the 1980s with a phase often referred to as the New Museology, proposing that the field should focus not only on operational procedures, such as visitor attendance figures, fiscal management, and the preservation of objects¹¹, but more deeply on the purpose of museums within a broader social context, addressing their roles in preservation of cultural and social memory and considering how exhibitions can shape public understanding¹², also fostering the adoption of a pluralist and international perspective¹³. This new approach helped to lay the groundwork for contemporary discussions on a museum's ethical and social function. Following this path, in the mid-1990s and extending into the early 2000s, New Institutionalism emerged, particularly within a North European context, with the primary aim being to transform the museum into a more democratic space. The goal was to shift viewers from passive art consumers to active

¹⁰ Images source:

<<https://www.wikiart.org/en/marcel-broodthaers/museum-of-modern-art-department-of-eagles-1968>> (Last accessed: 22.02.2026).

¹¹ A. Sauvage, *To be or not to be colonial: Museums facing their exhibitions*, «Culturales», 6(12), 2010, p. 108.

¹² P. Vergo, *The New Museology*, London: Reaktion Books, 1989, p. 3.

¹³ Sauvage, *To be or not to be colonial...*, cit., p. 109.

providers of personal inquiry, empowering them to participate in the meaning-making process. As articulated by curator Laura Raicovich, the concept of ‘museum neutrality’ is a fiction that only serves to uphold the status quo and the values of the dominant culture, referring to a superficial satisfaction of the contemporary call for diversity¹⁴. Indeed, it is specifically through a process of transformation that this debate can continue its academic evolution from a supposed ‘neutrality’ of museums to their active social presence. Without fundamentally changing their internal power structures, many museums appear to often essentialize multiple cultures, presenting them as static and separate ‘others’ through temporary programming, but failing to interrogate the colonial histories that have shaped them through their permanent narrative¹⁵. This allows institutions to appear inclusive while maintaining an original hegemonic framework and avoiding the difficult, continuous work of systemic change that is, instead, required¹⁶.

Prompted by this growing critical discourse, the theme of museum decolonization has become a central and urgent debate within contemporary museology. One of the most influential pieces of literature in the matter is the James Clifford’s essay, *Museums as Contact Zones*¹⁷. Clifford theorized the museum as a space where different cultures’ perspectives, particularly those of Indigenous source communities, meet, opening a pathway for dialogue. It provided the theoretical justification for the increase in collaborative programs, such as shared curatorship, co-production of exhibitions, and the establishment of dedicated spaces for dialogue with source community experts¹⁸. More specifically, other scholars like Brown & Peers (2003) are positive on the increasing willingness of museums to accelerate collaboration with source communities, viewing this as evidence of potential for change. They emphasized that «artefacts in museums embody both the local knowledge and histories that produced them, and the global histories of Western expansion which have resulted in their collection, transfer to museums, and function as sources of new academic and popular knowledge»¹⁹. In this regard, this concept has pushed museums to incorporate the living, oral histories of colonial collections, becoming widely adopted, debated, and critiqued in

¹⁴ L. Raicovich, *Culture Strike: Art and Museums in an Age of Protest* London, UK: Verso, 2021, p. 27.

¹⁵ O. Basciano, L. Raicovich, *How Museums Can Become Spaces for Care*, in «ArtReview». <<https://artreview.com/laura-raicovich-how-museums-can-become-spaces-for-care/>> (2020) (Last accessed: 22.02.2026).

¹⁶ L. T. S. Autry, M. Murawski, *Museums Are Not Neutral: We Are Stronger Together*, «Journal of the Association of Historians of American», 5(2), 2019.

¹⁷ J. Clifford, *Routes: Travel and Translation in the Late Twentieth Century*, Cambridge, Chapter 7: *Museums as Contact Zones*, MA: Harvard University Press, 1997.

¹⁸ R. Boast, *Neocolonial collaboration: museum as contact zone revisited*, «Mus. Anthropol.», 34(1), 2011, pp. 1-2.

¹⁹ A. K. Brown, L. Peers, *Museums and Source Communities*, London: Routledge, 2003, p. 5.

academic literature, with scholars exploring both its potential for inter-cultural dialogue and its limitations in addressing inherent power asymmetries that persist in neocolonial collaborations.

In more recent years, this other side of the debate started to emerge strongly, with multiple scholars arguing that true decolonization is ultimately unachievable within existing museum structures, questioning why only a partial portrait of the contact zone is perpetuated. Simpson (2011)²⁰ and Lonetree (2012)²¹, both Indigenous scholars, caution that museum efforts often fall short of genuine decolonization, arguing that the true goal is Indigenous sovereignty and the complete dismantling of the colonial structures these institutions embody. In his analysis of repatriation's political and legal challenges, Boast (2011)²² contends that colonial power structures persist within museums, dismissing ideas of a 'contact zone' as mere masks for maintaining existing appropriations and social biases²³.

While some positions might result extreme, we can state that the sustained period of critical self-reflection has undoubtedly repositioned the museum as a more socially responsive public sphere. As Kreps (2020)²⁴ frames it, in the current 'age of engagement', museums and anthropology are compelled to be more socially accountable to the diverse communities whose histories they present. However, despite a need for transformative change in institutional and educational management, museums often struggle with defining their contemporary social role and meeting the demands of the present day. The core challenge lies in the absence of a singular governing body to enforce specific guidelines, even though it allows individual institutions and nations the autonomy to operate according to their own discretion. Consequently, while a widespread need for reform exists, the International Council of Museums (ICOM) remains the most referenced subject when it comes to instituting guidelines for museum practices. Although its ethical codes are not legally binding, they still serve as the primary global standard, offering a critical point of reference in an otherwise unregulated environment²⁵. The approval of a new museum definition by ICOM in 2022 explicitly committed museums to «operate and communicate ethically, professionally

²⁰ A. Simpson, *Settlement's Secret*, «*Cultural Anthropology*», 26(2), 2011, pp. 205-217.

²¹ A. Lonetree, *Decolonizing Museums: Representing Native America in National and Tribal Museums*, Chapel Hill: Univ. N. C. Press, 2012.

²² Boast, *Neocolonial collaboration...*, cit., pp. 56-70.

²³ Ivi, p. 67.

²⁴ C. F. Kreps, *Museums and Anthropology in the Age of Engagement*, London: Routledge, 2020.

²⁵ ICOM, *ICOM Code of Ethics for Museums*.

<<https://icom.museum/wp-content/uploads/2018/07/ICOM-code-En-web.pdf>> (2017) (Last accessed: 22.02.2026).

and with the participation of communities»²⁶, operating a significant shift from the previous definition. This revised wording underscores a deliberate move toward greater institutional accountability and community engagement. A primary concern embedded within the term 'ethically' as it applies to museums can be found specifically in the process of decolonization. The ethical obligation for museums to decolonize is, indeed, a multifaceted issue with various interpretations, making it difficult to identify a homogeneous solution that can be implemented. This is also why the status of decolonization varies in each country, depending on political interest, curator commitment, available funds, and many other external factors. As theorized by indigenous activist Linda Tuhiwai Smith, museum decolonization requires a fundamental shift in mindset and practices, affecting everything from collection management to exhibition narratives²⁷.

Despite their role as historical registries, museums must reflect the dynamic nature of 'living' cultures, recognizing the cultural continuum by incorporating it into their collections, programming, and institutional gaze. In this regard, decolonization becomes not merely a call for the repatriation of objects, but a fundamental re-evaluation of the frameworks that have historically underpinned curatorial practice, demanding a critical examination of the provenance of collections and a commitment to addressing the ethical questions surrounding their ownership. In certain European nations, the pressure to transform museums has resulted in significant shifts, compelling these institutions to renew themselves drastically in order to survive. This systemic renovation is clearly demonstrated by the incredible volume of ethnographic collections that have been closed, reopened, redesigned, or relocated with a new focus, like the Vienna *Weltmuseum*, created from the former Museum of Ethnography or the *Musée du Quai Branly in Paris*. In Italy, a similar shift can be observed in the former Colonial Museum, which is being reopened to the public as part of the *Museo delle Civiltà in Rome* in 2023, with the ongoing project named *Museo delle Opacità*.

²⁶ *Museum definition by ICOM*: «A museum is a not-for-profit, permanent institution in the service of society that researches, collects, conserves, interprets and exhibits tangible and intangible heritage. Open to the public, accessible and inclusive, museums foster diversity and sustainability. They operate and communicate ethically, professionally and with the participation of communities, offering varied experiences for education, enjoyment, reflection and knowledge sharing».

<<https://icom.museum/en/resources/standards-guidelines/museum-definition/>> (2022) (Last accessed: 22.02.2026).

²⁷ L. T. Smith, *Decolonizing methodologies: Research and Indigenous peoples*, London: Zed Books Ltd, II ed., 2012.

1.2)

UNIVERSAL MUSEUMS AND ETHNOCENTRIC PROPAGANDA: THE CONSTRUCTION OF A COLONIAL GAZE

The historical origins of the museum are inextricably linked to the assertion of Western national power, as deeply asserted by Krzysztof Pomian in his three volume series *Le Musée, une histoire mondiale*²⁸. Evolving from the private collections of the Renaissance, such as the noblemen's *Studiolo* or *Wunderkammern* (Cabinets of Curiosities), museums originally displayed a miscellany of paintings, artifacts, and natural specimens. In this early private context, the collections functioned as a social device to establish rank and display the owner's command of the world's knowledge. Evolving from this personal and subjective context, by the 18th century, driven by Enlightenment ideals of education, scientific advancement, and national pride, museum collection practices started to undergo a deep internal change towards a more public and institutional approach²⁹. This transition involved shifts from exclusive displays of varied objects to thematic presentations of artifacts, eventually incorporating public access, visitor experience, technology, and a broader focus on cultural heritage and community engagement. These practices, which gradually shifted focus toward collecting objects that were representative rather than those valued for their rarity, aligned with some nation's interest in justifying colonial expansion by officially exhibiting human history through a narrative of progress. Specifically, under the lens of Darwin's theory of natural evolution, European colonialism was presented as the 'evidence' of progress and an inevitable stage of human history³⁰. The concept of the Universal Museum emerged for this very purpose during the European Enlightenment, as a way to house and display knowledge for the public, on the belief that a single, authoritative space could represent all of human culture and history. However, genuine knowledge transfer was limited, as objects, removed from their original contexts, were displayed to a public that lacked the necessary tools to fully understand their meaning³¹.

²⁸ K. Pomian, *Le Musée, une histoire mondiale. T. 1: Du trésor au musée, T. 2: L'ancrage européen, 1789-1850, T. 3: À la conquête du monde, 1850-2020*, Paris: Gallimard, 2020.

²⁹ J. E. Simmons, *Museums. A History*, Chapter 5-6, London: Rowman & Littlefield, 2016.

³⁰ Sauvage, *To be or not to be colonial...*, cit., p. 106.

³¹ *Universal Museums*: The establishment of Universal Museums like the British Museum (London, 1759) and the Louvre Museum (Paris, 1793) marked a transition from private knowledge to public domain. This was seen as a radical act of making art accessible to all citizens, moving it from the hands of the elite to the public sphere.

As stated by Françoise Vergès (2024)³², the purpose of the universal museum was not just to display objects or to represent cultural differences, but to construct a specific gaze, since a successful colonial project rests on the colonizer's ethnocentric certainty that its values are more advanced than those of the conquered.

To further discuss the construction of a propagandistic gaze, the concepts of stereotyping, fetishization and primitivization must be introduced into the debate. According to Homi Bhabha, 'stereotyping' can be described as, «knowledge and identification that vacillates between what is always already known, and something that's repeated»³³. Colonizers used stereotyping as a means of creating a simplified identity for large groups of conquered people, regardless of the accuracy of that identity. Essentially, it was a tool for establishing a specific system of representation that helped them manage and categorize the colonized population. Similarly, 'fetish' was an ambiguous concept used to differentiate cultures based on the material things they considered significant. 'Primitivization' and 'primitivism', on the other hand, are the historical processes through which non-Western cultures were systematically relegated to an undeveloped stage of human history. This concept was entrenched in colonial-era anthropology and influenced the Primitivist movement that emerged in European art at the turn of the 20th century, including Paul Gauguin, Henri Matisse, and Pablo Picasso, who sought formal innovation by engaging with, and often appropriating, anthropological artifacts from Africa, Oceania, and the Americas. While these artists claimed to be seeking a more 'pure' form of expression, their reliance on objects created by cultures they perceived as 'primitive' reinforced the very hierarchy that deemed non-Western societies as conceptually simpler than the modern West³⁴. Alongside this appropriation, an additional mechanism for training the spectator to adopt a colonial perspective was gradually employed by the modern Nation-State, implemented mainly through temporary exhibitions. These events, which began as massive propaganda efforts, were so successful they often directly led to the establishment of permanent colonial museums³⁵. Giulia Grechi defines the performative nature of this practice as *mostrazione*,

³² F. Vergès, *A Programme of Absolute Disorder: Decolonizing the Museum*, Paris: La Fabrique, Translation by Melissa Thackway, 2024, pp. 1-24.

³³ H. K. Bhabha, *The Other Question: The Stereotype and Colonial Discourse*, In K.M. Newton (eds) *Twentieth-Century Literary Theory*, London: Palgrave, 1997, p. 293.

³⁴ S. Beus, *Museums, Colonial Legacies, and Contemporary Art, Part 2: Primitivism and the Division of "Modern" and "Traditional"*, Grey Art Museum, New York University.

<https://greyartmuseum.nyu.edu/2020/10/museums-colonial-legacies-and-contemporary-art-part-2-primitivism-modern-traditional/> (2020) (Last accessed: 22.02.2026).

³⁵ G. Grechi, *Decolonizzare il museo. Mostrazioni, pratiche artistiche, sguardi incarnati*, Milano: Mimesis Edizioni, 2021, pp. 47-48.

indicating that the exhibited object is defined all by virtue of the classificatory modalities chosen to display it, making them a determining element for the very interpretation of the material³⁶. By showcasing these objects in venues like the Universal Expositions through ‘freak shows’ (anthropozoological exhibitions), the colonized were shaped into consumable spectacles aimed at educating the public, casting colonial expansion not as an act of mere exploitation, but as a mission of bringing progress to the ‘primitive’³⁷. Following this evolution, we can assert that the museum's very existence can be viewed as a colonizing fact, a system in which non-European cultural heritage provided knowledge of foreign cultures to facilitate a more effective administration of subjugated territories.

In a post colonial environment, this inevitably leads to conflict over the ownership of objects imbued with identity value, making museum exhibitions a «contested terrain» where the «struggle is not just over what is to be represented, but who will control the means of representation» and, ultimately, «the articulation of identity»³⁸.

In this regard, the legacy of the 1989 exhibition *Magiciens de la Terre* consist in a significant case which illustrate a turning point in the transition from ‘world art’³⁹ to global art, primarily by asserting the shared contemporaneity of Western and non-Western artists, but without ultimately dismantling structural inequality. The exhibition, curated by Jean-Hubert Martin and staged by the *Centre Pompidou*, was promoted as the «first global exhibition of contemporary art», aiming to replace the nationalistic framework of traditional biennials with a ‘new internationalism’⁴⁰. This aspiration positioned the show at the center of a fierce debate concerning the ethics used for presenting non-Western art. The exhibition featured approximately 100 artists: half from the ‘West’ and half from the ‘peripheries’, including «the Third World and Socialist countries»⁴¹. Despite this surface commitment to equality, the execution was widely critiqued for its curatorial criteria. Western artists, often based in the U.S. or already integrated into the European system (like Marina Abramović), were recognized as established contemporaries; conversely, the selection of non-Western artists often ignored their engagement with modernism and academic traditions, favoring instead

³⁶ Grechi, *Decolonizzare il museo...*, cit, p. 2.

³⁷ Sauvage, *To be or not to be colonial...*, cit., p. 107.

³⁸ I. Karp, *Culture and representation*, in *Exhibiting cultures: The poetics and politics of museum display*, Smithsonian Institution Press, 1991, p. 15.

³⁹ *World art*: The term referred to non-Western production housed within ethnographic settings, where it was often framed as the output of ‘primitive’ societies, a categorization that subjected these works to a process of exclusion within the modernist canon.

⁴⁰ D. Đ. Janković, *Anticipating Decoloniality: The Case of the Magiciens de la Terre*. <<https://loophole.art/articles/the-magiciens-de-la-terre>> (2025) (Last accessed: 22.02.2026).

⁴¹ *Ibidem*.

works that were easily categorized as anthropological. This disparity was also physically cemented in the display methodology, presenting many non-Western, site-specific works as mock-ups that mimicked the framing of ethnographic museums, reducing these contemporary creators to exoticized curiosities⁴².

While the exhibition's ambition was recognized as a significant step toward worldwide internationalism, its most lasting legacy rests on its transnational curatorial model. This approach became significantly influential, offering a template for the proliferation of large-scale global exhibitions from the 1990s onward, still creating today an imperative for a global art discourse⁴³. However, despite its groundbreaking scope, *Magiciens de la Terre* ultimately failed to transform broader museum policies or secure the long-term inclusion of non-Western works through formal acquisitions. In this sense, the exhibition did not represent the political emancipation of modernity; rather, it manifested a profound methodological crisis within the discipline of art history, highlighting the persistent disconnect between temporary curatorial gestures and permanent institutional transformation⁴⁴.

From all of these considerations, it is critical to underline how colonization has fundamentally shaped the museum's social purpose, making deconstruction of these histories a complex mandate in contemporary museology. The worldwide pressure emanating from both local and global communities has profoundly amplified the charge of museum decolonization with the expectation of achieving moral restoration⁴⁵. This pressure insists that institutions confront their foundations, investing in provenance research and the ethical imperative of restitution, reforming internal governance, exhibition design, and educational programs in order to transparently condemn harmful stereotypes, including discrimination related to racism, sexism, or homophobia, thereby visibly supporting fundamental human and equal rights issues⁴⁶.

On the other hand, this demand can result in a profound dilemma. While curators and directors are increasingly expected to undertake this ethical work, they are, simultaneously, responsible for delicate negotiations with conservative patrons and administrators who

⁴² Janković, *Anticipating Decoloniality...*, cit.

⁴³ P. Lafuente, *Introduction: From the Outside In – 'Magiciens de la Terre' and Two Histories of Exhibitions*, «*Exhibition Histories series*». <<https://www.afterall.org/articles/introduction-from-the-outside-in-magiciens-de-la-terre-and-two-histories-of-exhibitions/>> (2013) (Last accessed: 22.02.2026).

⁴⁴ M. Gulia, *Magiciens de la terre come evento soglia della global art history? Ipotesi e prospettive di ricerca a partire dalla ricezione della mostra*, «*Venezia Arti*», 7(34), 2025, p. 92

⁴⁵ F. Bacci, *Reconceptualizing museum decolonization: A proposal for the repatriation of agency*, *Routledge Open Res*, 3(20), 2024, p. 2.

⁴⁶ C. E. Ariese, M. Wróblewska, *Practicing decoloniality in museums: a guide with global examples*, Amsterdam University Press, 2022, p. 2.

control funding. There is, therefore, a tangible commercial threat, particularly in the European context, that embracing a progressive agenda may alienate the traditional audience, jeopardizing essential funding streams. These donors may see re-interpretation as an attack on the museum's history or their own philanthropic legacy, leading them to withdraw financial support⁴⁷. The result is a delicate negotiation where directors must continually justify the necessity of ethical change to stakeholders, often forcing a slow pace of dismantling, prioritizing financial stability over rapid moral alignment.

1.3)

CONTEMPORARY MUSEUMS: FROM CONTROVERSIAL INSTITUTIONS INTO CRITICAL SPACES

1.3.1)

RESTITUTION AND REPATRIATION: ETHICAL AND LEGAL MATTERS

As contextualized in the previous paragraph, discussions about contested cultural heritage are based on the changing role of museums as people-centred platforms for debate that embrace a wide diversity of perspectives and political discourses. The introduction of human rights into the decision-making process has been the primary catalyst for significant progress in Indigenous heritage claims, urging museums to fundamentally reshape their relationship with affected communities⁴⁸. These considerations connect to the important theme of restitutions, a phenomenon that is part of the recent initiatives for colonial 'remediation' by former colonizing countries.

The 1970 UNESCO Convention represents the inaugural framework dedicated to the protection of cultural heritage through the regulation of international movement. While the Convention mandates that Contracting States implement administrative safeguards, including the establishment of national protection services and the regulation of the art market, it

⁴⁷ Bacci, *Reconceptualizing museum decolonization...*, cit., p. 3.

⁴⁸ P. Soirila, *Indeterminacy in the Cultural Property Restitution Debate*, «*International Journal of Cultural Policy*», 28(1), 2021, p. 11-12.

notably lacks a retroactive mandate. Consequently, it does not impose a general legal obligation to secure the restitution of antiquities removed prior to its ratification, a limitation that continues to shape contemporary decolonial legal disputes. Central to the Convention's efficacy is the export certification system (Article 6), which renders such documentation mandatory for both exporting and importing nations⁴⁹.

In the technical lexicon of international heritage law, it is essential to distinguish between the various modalities of cultural transfer. The term 'return' specifically addresses objects acquired through illicit trafficking that occurred in the absence of a law infraction. During the colonial period, the lack of active normative frameworks meant that the extraction of cultural heritage was not technically illegal under the colonizer's law. The term 'restitution' refers to the procedural return of cultural objects to a specific individual or community after they have been illicitly moved, while 'repatriation' consists in a state-centric process by which cultural objects are returned to a sovereign state at the formal request of a government. It is a diplomatic act of restoring national patrimony to the territory of origin. This process challenges hierarchies of knowledge that historically privileged Western institutions, forcing them to recognize originating communities as decision-makers regarding their heritage⁵⁰. For communities of origin, restitution is often reframed as an act of healing, essential for revitalizing cultural practices and for generating new relationships between local museums and global communities⁵¹.

Despite the theme of repatriation becoming increasingly prominent in both public discourse and museum praxis, the demand for restitution tend to be fundamentally driven by claimants, as asserted by Thompson (2003)⁵². Indeed, the intellectual debate over the restitution of cultural property is frequently framed as a conflict between two opposing legal and ethical viewpoints, famously defined by John Henry Merryman as «cultural nationalism» and «cultural internationalism». The first one emphasizes the profound connection of heritage to the national or communal identity of the originating group, therefore favouring the return of

⁴⁹ UNESCO, *Convention on the Means of Prohibiting and Preventing the Illicit Import, Export and Transfer of Ownership of Cultural Property*.

<<https://www.unesco.org/en/legal-affairs/convention-means-prohibiting-and-preventing-illicit-import-export-and-transfer-ownership-cultural>> (Last accessed: 22.02.2026).

⁵⁰ UNESCO, *Reframing the Return and Restitution of Cultural property in Southern Africa*.

<<https://www.unesco.org/en/articles/reframing-return-and-restitution-cultural-property-southern-africa-healing-new-bold-step-toward>> (2025) (Last accessed: 22.02.2026).

⁵¹ S. Warren, *Rethinking Museum Geographies: Towards Restitution and a Relational Ethics of Care in Legacies of Colonialism*, «*Geography Compass*», 19(1), 2025, p. 1.

⁵² J. Thompson, *Cultural property, restitution and value*, «*Journal of Applied Philosophy*», 20(3), 2003, pp. 251-262.

objects, while the second claims the universal and encyclopedic value of objects, arguing for their accessibility within global institutions for the benefit of all humanity⁵³.

An interesting example is that of France. During a public address in 2017 at the University of Ouagadougou in Burkina Faso, President Emmanuel Macron declared his intention to implement a massive restitution plan concerning African cultural heritage. In late 2018, a consequent report commissioned by Macron and co-authored by academics Felwine Sarr and Bénédicte Savoy was published, becoming relevant in the international debate⁵⁴. Titled *The Restitution of African Cultural Heritage. Toward a New Relational Ethics*, the report argued that the prosperity of European museums is directly linked to colonial extraction and called for the repatriation of cultural heritage from French public institutions back to former African colonies, in order to achieve the «re-harmonization of a veritable global cultural geography»⁵⁵.

«Thus, for the African countries, it's about accomplishing a twofold task of the reconstruction of their memories and one of self-reinvention, through a re-semanticization and a re-socialization of the objects of their cultural heritage, through reconnecting these objects with the current societies and the questions and problems that these contemporary societies pose»⁵⁶.

Globally speaking, the process of gaining approval for the restitution of cultural objects is often protracted, with many requests in a state of limbo after the return of a few iconic collections, as will be demonstrated by the France case. Additionally, museums often encounter dilemmas in their practical work, even if they are willing to return cultural heritage in the first place. For instance, the curatorial management of religiously associated objects can present issues when carried out in the 'national' interest rather than to respect indigenous rights, failing to address the core concerns of the originating communities⁵⁷. For this very reason, international heritage debates often emphasize preservation as a primary justification for retaining contested objects, arguing that the value of comparative context is central and that objects must be kept intact to retain their cultural significance⁵⁸. This preservation-first

⁵³ J.H. Merryman, *Thinking about the Elgin marbles*, «*Michigan Law Review*», 83(8), 1985, pp. 1880-1923.

⁵⁴ Grechi, *Decolonizzare il museo...*, cit., p. 155.

⁵⁵ F. Sarr, B. Savoy, *The Restitution of African Cultural Heritage: Toward a New Relational Ethics*, Ministère de la culture, 2018, p. 3.

⁵⁶ *Ivi*, p. 32.

⁵⁷ UN Human Rights Council, Secretariat, *Report of the Expert Mechanism on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples*, 2023, p. 18.

⁵⁸ Merryman, *Thinking about the Elgin marbles...*, cit.

perspective, however, is often criticized for its inherent Eurocentricity. Critics argue that such principles frequently clash with the essential purpose of many non-Western cultural objects, where decay, cyclical renewal, or active use is, in fact, an integral part of their spiritual or communal function⁵⁹. Given these high stakes, the issue of restitution must always be addressed on a case-by-case basis, alongside a legal deliberation to ensure respect for the diverse meanings of cultural property⁶⁰.

As evidence for this argument, the French restitution of the Treasure of Béhanzin⁶¹ will now be analyzed. Used by the cited report as a prime case study, the restitution of the 26 artifacts to the Republic of Benin stands as one of the most defining cases in the contemporary decolonial movement⁶². The momentum for their return began with President Macron's 2017 speech, underlining the need for the French Parliament to pass a specific law in 2020 which created a derogation to the 16th-century principle of inalienability (*inaliénabilité*) of French national collections. Breaking this legal barrier was considered a necessary first step for any permanent restitution from French state museums, making the case of the royal objects to Benin a charged political event, also narrated in the 2024 documentary film, *Dahomey* (Fig. 3) directed by Mati Diop⁶³. A problematic factor surrounding this restitution is its genesis as an unilateral political act by France, which dictated the terms, scope, and methodology of the return. The subsequent debate, as highlighted in *Dahomey*, underscores the limitation of this unilateral approach since these 26 pieces represent a fraction of the estimated 70,000 total African objects that remain in French collections⁶⁴. This meant the Beninese government had little procedural say in setting the terms of the return, leaving the majority of their heritage still held abroad and emphasizing France's control over the action's narrative and scale.

⁵⁹ Soirila, *Indeterminacy in the Cultural Property...*, cit., p. 8.

⁶⁰ *Ibidem*.

⁶¹ *Treasure of Béhanzin*: The objects, which included royal statues and thrones, were seized by French colonial troops during the sack of the Abomey Palace in 1892 and were held for decades by the *Musée du Quai Branly-Jacques Chirac* in Paris.

⁶² *Musée du quai Branly, Restitution of 26 works to the Republic of Benin*. <<https://www.quaibrantly.fr/en/collections/living-collections/news/restitution-of-26-works-to-the-republic-of-benin/>> (2018) (Last accessed: 22.02.2026).

⁶³ *Dahomey*: The documentary by Mati Diop, a French-Senegalese filmmaker, follows the journey of these objects to their homeland employing a lyrical lens to tell the cultural trauma inflicted by the objects' original removal and the complex emotions surrounding their return. The film delves into the intangible historical context and the political and symbolic meanings embedded in the act of restitution.

⁶⁴ Sarr, Savoy, *The Restitution of African Cultural Heritage...*, cit., p. 48.



Fig. 3

Dahomey (Mati Diop, 2024).

The French approach provides a significant model of consequential legal evolution, where political will has been systematically translated into statutory mandates. A pivotal advancement occurred in April 2023 with the publication of the report *Patrimoine partagé: universalité, restitutions et circulation des œuvres d'art*⁶⁵. This document proposes a rigorous doctrine for evaluating "restitutability" and advocates for a framework law. Such a law would move beyond *ad hoc*, case-by-case legislation, instead establishing a standardized, permanent legal procedure for processing restitution requests across all national institutions.

In contrast to the French legislative model, other nations, such as Germany and Belgium, demonstrate a decentralised legal approach where the impetus for restitution has been driven primarily by institutional agency. In these jurisdictions, cultural institutions have often acted independently from central government mandates, establishing ethical frameworks that eventually shaped state policy from the bottom up⁶⁶.

⁶⁵ J. L. Martinez, *Patrimoine partagé. Universalité, restitutions et circulation des œuvres d'art. Vers une législation et une doctrine françaises sur les «critères de restituabilité» pour les biens culturels*, Rapport à M. le Président de la République, 2023.

⁶⁶ L. Carofano, *Unfinished Business: Italy's missing approach to colonial returns in a comparative perspective*, In *«Heritage in War and Peace IV: Selected Strathclyde Papers»*, Glasgow, 2025, p. 3.

A hallmark of this institutional leadership is the German Museums Association's 2018 'Guidelines on Dealing with Collections from Colonial Contexts'. Although initially a non-binding document, it provided a robust ethical scaffolding that allowed public collections and authorities to navigate colonial legacies. This framework was formally adopted in 2019 through a joint initiative involving the German federal government, states, and municipalities, in collaboration with ICOM Germany. The efficacy of this self-regulatory model led to the 2021 publication of an expanded and updated iteration "Guidelines for German Museums: Care of Collections from Colonial Contexts"⁶⁷.

Furthermore, Belgium represents an equally significant case in the passage from ethical debate to codified statutory law. The process was initiated in 2021 with the publication of the 'Ethical Principles for the Management and Restitution of Colonial Collections in Belgium', a seminal document drafted by an independent expert panel that established the groundwork for legislative action. This series of directives culminated in the Belgian Restitution Bill of 2022, making it the first case of a comprehensive legal framework specifically designed to facilitate the return of colonial-era looted property in EU⁶⁸. This legislation was integrated into a broader national reckoning, following the 2020 establishment of the Special 'Truth and Reconciliation' Commission in Congo, Rwanda, and Burundi. The Commission's preparatory report was instrumental in this transition, as it identified heritage restitution not merely as a curatorial task, but as a central requirement for diplomatic and social reconciliation⁶⁹.

While Italy has recently experienced a marginal acceleration in the discourse surrounding colonial-era cultural property, it still lacks a systematic, *ad-hoc* legislation framework for restitution. This gap has delegated the responsibility of addressing colonial legacies directly to museums and cultural organizations, which often pursue independent initiatives untethered from federal mandates. In an attempt to address these pressures, the Italian Ministry of Culture issued a Ministerial Decree⁷⁰ in 2021, and its subsequent integration in 2022, establishing a specialized 'Working Group on Colonial Collections'. Entrusted with the historical contextualization of sensitive collections, the Group operates with procedural autonomy, possessing the mandate to consult external specialists to address exigencies as

⁶⁷ German Museums Association, *Guidelines for German Museums: Care of Collections from Colonial Contexts*. <<https://www.museumbund.de/wp-content/uploads/2021/03/mbleitfaden-en-web.pdf>> (2021) (Last accessed: 22.02.2026).

⁶⁸ M. S. de Clippele, B. Demarsin, *Pioneering Belgium: Parliamentary Legislation on the Restitution of Colonial Collections*, «*Santander Art and Culture Law Review*», 8(2), 2022, p. 325.

⁶⁹ Carofano, *Unfinished Business...*, cit., p. 4.

⁷⁰ M.D. October 18, 2021, n. 365, *Costituzione presso il Comitato per il recupero e la restituzione dei beni culturali del Gruppo di lavoro per lo studio delle tematiche relative alle collezioni coloniali*.

they arise. Significantly, rather than establishing an independent entity, the Ministry chose to institutionalize this working group within the pre-existing ‘Committee for the Recovery and Restitution of Cultural Property’. Historically, this body was formulated to coordinate the repatriation of heritage illicitly trafficked out of Italy or to manage returns within the EU’s regulatory framework. This integration raises questions regarding institutional methodology, as it attempts to address the claims of former colonies using a machinery optimized for the restitution of Italian artifacts to the domestic sphere⁷¹. Ultimately, the impact of this Group remains circumscribed by its structural limitations, primarily confined to provenance research, making its effectiveness difficult to assess, as no report has yet been produced.

1.3.2)

VISUAL ARTS AND THE REFRAMING OF ETHNOGRAPHIC COLLECTIONS

Moving from the political and legal act of repatriation, this analysis will now focus on the paradigm shift being operationalized in the numerous cases in which these restorative practices are not considered, for the previously mentioned reasons. Even when the physical act of repatriation is not manageable, a crucial decolonial intervention can be implemented through representation and collections care and the integration of supplementary media and contemporary art in the display of contested collections.

The 1990s saw an emergence of new art forms that actively engaged with archival and documentary formats, specifically when institutional critique began to affect curatorial priorities. Employing forms like performance and imaginary narratives, fiction is employed to actively dismantle the notion of the archive as an objective record, positioning historiography as a form of narration⁷². In a related view, some museums have sought to borrow elements from this exhibition model and apply them to the display of ethnographic artifacts in order to create a multi-perspective dialogue between objects and artists.

In this regard, the *Musée du Quai Branly* is a successful example of employing contemporary art as a positive complement to its historical holdings. Under the motto, “*là où dialoguent les cultures*” (where cultures interact), the institution sought to revolutionize the display of

⁷¹ Carofano, *Unfinished Business...*, cit., pp. 6-7.

⁷² C. Chwatal, *Decolonizing the Ethnographic Museum: Contemporary Art and the Weltmuseum Wien*, «*Art Papers*», 42(1), 2018, p. 16.

non-Western art through an integration of contemporary installations. This strategy is most visible in the museum's integration of Aboriginal Australian art, such as the abstract piece *Dayiwul Lirlmim* by Lena Nyadbi⁷³, a site-specific work covering the museum's 700-square-metre rooftop, being visible from different levels of the Eiffel Tower (Fig. 4,5).

While the painting provides a striking aesthetic presence, its true power lies in its critique of the destructive legacies of colonialism, referencing the Gija people's ancestral lands⁷⁴. By exposing this narrative of resource displacement, the museum allows contemporary Indigenous voices to confront colonial history, reframing the collection not as a static archive, but as a site of ongoing political and cultural dialogue.



Fig. 4

Lena Nyadbi, *Dayiwul Lirlmim* (Scales of a Barramundi), *Musée du Quai Branly*, Paris, 2013⁷⁵.

⁷³ *Lena Nyadbi AO (1936-2024)*: She was a leading Gija artist from the Warmun Community. Her work is defined by a rich and spare aesthetic, characterized by a palette of earthy tones and strongly contrasting colors, maintaining a deep material connection to the land, using traditional techniques, such as hand-applying charcoal and grinding natural ochre.

⁷⁴ *Dayiwul Lirlmim*: The work tells of an ancestral barramundi pursued by women with spinifex nets. Seeking escape, the fish leaped through a mountain pass (Barramundi Gap), shedding scales that transformed into diamonds. This spiritual link gained a tragic physical reality in the 1980s. Following the start of diamond mining, the sacred Barramundi Gap was destroyed, resulting in the displacement of Indigenous communities.

⁷⁵ Image source:

<<https://aajipress.wordpress.com/2013/06/11/lena-nyadbi-dayiwul-lirlmim-barramundi-scales-musee-du-quai-branly-paris/>> (Last accessed: 22.02.2026).

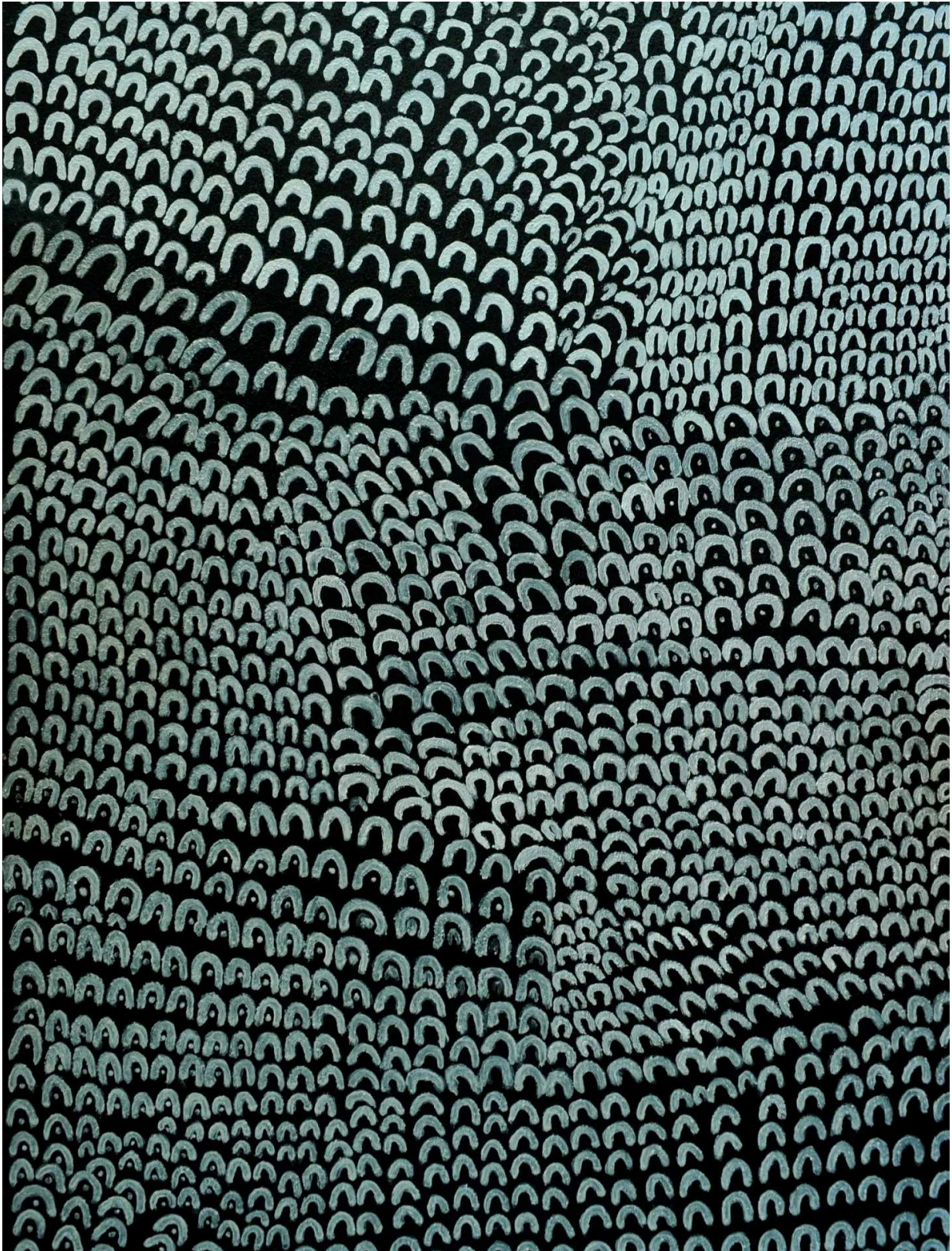


Fig. 5

Lena Nyadbi, *Dayiwul Lirlmim* (Scales of a Barramundi), *Musée du Quai Branly*, Paris, 2013⁷⁶.

⁷⁶ Image source:

<<https://aajipress.wordpress.com/2013/06/11/lena-nyadbi-dayiwul-lirlmim-barramundi-scales-musee-du-quai-branly-paris/>> (Last accessed: 22.02.2026).

A further example is the 2017 rebranding of the *Weltmuseum Wien*⁷⁷, which exemplifies a prioritized post-colonial inquiry⁷⁸. Here, the museum moves beyond the mere exhibition of contemporary art; instead, through its temporary programs, it internalizes these interventions to fundamentally reshape its own modes of display⁷⁹. Central to this process was the 2015 theatrical project by choreographer Claudia Bosse, which reorganized the museum's conceptual framework by centering its programming on urgent issues, such as migration, neoliberal globalism, and the rise of right-wing nationalism. This transformation is solidified by a fundamental rethinking of exhibition design and the ethical treatment of objects⁸⁰.



Fig. 6

Claudia Bosse, *theatercombinat* third step to IDEAL PARADISE, *Weltmuseum*, Vienna, 2015⁸¹.

⁷⁷ *Weltmuseum Wien*: Originally housed within the Imperial Court Museum in 1876, the ethnological collections gained independence as the Museum of Ethnology following World War II. In 2001, it was integrated into the *Kunsthistorisches Museum* alongside the *Theatermuseum*. The institution embraced its current identity in 2013.

⁷⁸ *Weltmuseum Wien*: About Us.

<<https://www.weltmuseumwien.at/en/about-us/>> (Last accessed: 22.02.2026).

⁷⁹ C. Augustat, *Dealing with the Colonial Past at the Weltmuseum Wien: A Curator's Perspective*, «*Journal of Museum Ethnography*», 32, 2019, p. 19.

⁸⁰ Chwatal, *Decolonizing the Ethnographic Museum...*, cit., p. 15.

⁸¹ Image source: <https://www.theatercombinat.com/projekte/katastrophen/KAT_impuls_performance_en.html> (Last accessed: 22.02.2026).

The resulting narrative emerged through the embodied interactions of the performers with archival documents, photographs, and artifacts within the remains of 19th-century display cases, asserting that the ‘entangled histories’ of ethnographic objects are most profoundly decoded through live, human engagement (Fig. 6). In this context, the body of the performer becomes a medium for navigating the complexities of the past, suggesting that decoloniality is as much a physical and relational practice as it is an intellectual one⁸².

Decolonial practice in museums constitutes, ultimately, a commitment to systemic self-critique that operates across legal, curatorial, and ethical dimensions. As demonstrated throughout this chapter, such effort begins with the tangible act of restitution, which serves as a fundamental step toward the restoration of sovereignty. For the collections that remain, however, true decolonial transformation is achieved through methodological interventions, specifically by incorporating contemporary art and site-specific installations to open historical objects to pluralistic readings. The implementation of these dialogues with source communities and artists necessarily positions the curator as a central agent in decentering institutional authority. Yet, this intersectionality necessitates careful management to avoid new procedural complexities⁸³. A primary risk lies in a narrow reliance on contemporary artists: while this strategy effectively foregrounds indigenous perspectives, it may inadvertently condense a collective history into the singular voice of the featured artist or commissioning curator. In such instances, the museum risks replacing the traditional colonial gaze with an equally authoritative contemporary one⁸⁴.

In conclusion, decolonization within the museum setting should not be expected to be an immediate solution, but an intricate matter with inherent contradictions. Given this complexity, the commitment to methodological self-correction is the crucial mechanism that holds the potential to fundamentally shift the museum's narrative.

⁸² Chwatal, *Decolonizing the Ethnographic Museum...*, cit., p. 16.

⁸³ S. Beus, *Museums, Colonial Legacies, and Contemporary Art, Part 3: Expanding Modernism and Addressing Colonialism with Contemporary Art*, Grey Art Museum, New York University. <<https://greyartmuseum.nyu.edu/2020/10/museums-colonial-legacies-and-contemporary-art-part-3-expanding-modernism-addressing-colonialism/>> (2020) (Last accessed: 22.02.2026).

⁸⁴ Chwatal, *Decolonizing the Ethnographic Museum...*, cit., p. 18.

CHAPTER 2)

ITALIAN CONTESTED HERITAGE: INSTITUTIONAL TRANSFORMATION OF THE FORMER *MUSEO COLONIALE*

2.1)

POST-COLONIAL DEBATE IN THE ITALIAN ART SYSTEM

While major colonial powers like Britain, France, Spain, and Portugal tend to dominate the European post-colonial discourse, Italy is frequently not considered as a relevant case. This marginalization stems from historical realities such as its status as a latecomer to colonization, the specific nature of its empire, and ambiguous knowledge regarding its colonial history⁸⁵. Consequently, to effectively address decolonization practices within Italian museums, an examination of Italy's imperial history is required.

Immediately following Unification in 1861, Italy felt the urgent necessity to build a strong identity to present itself as an advanced, unified political entity capable of international competition⁸⁶. To «overcome their inferiority complex toward wealthier and powerful European nations»⁸⁷, this ambition quickly manifested as colonial expansion, starting with the creation of the first Italian colonial outpost in 1882, when the government of Agostino Depretis acquired administrative rights in Assab Bay on the Red Sea. This was the launch point for Italy's protracted colonization in the African Horn and North Africa, encompassing the occupation of Eritrea (beginning 1885), the obtainment of territorial concessions along the Somali coast, the attempted invasions of Ethiopia (initially in the 1890s, completed in 1936), and the Libyan War (1911-12), followed by years of brutal guerrilla warfare and

⁸⁵ F. Filippi, *Italy's Colonial Past Amid the Lies, Racism, and Selective Amnesia*, in «*Accenti*». <<https://accenti.ca/italys-colonial-past-amid-the-lies-racism-and-selective-amnesia/#:~:text=There%20are%20many%20factors%2C%20over.a%20political%20and%20cultural%20choice>> (2024) (Last accessed: 22.02.2026).

⁸⁶ M. Mellino, *Italy And Postcolonial Studies: A Difficult Encounter*, «*Interventions*», 8(3), 2006, p. 465.

⁸⁷ G. Ghiglione, *As Europe Reckons with Racism. Italy Still Won't Confront Its Colonial Past*, in «*Foreign Policy*», in «*FP Magazine*». <<https://foreignpolicy.com/2020/07/30/as-europe-reckons-with-racism-italy-still-wont-confront-its-colonial-past/>> (2020) (Last accessed: 22.02.2026).

reprisals⁸⁸. This drive intensified during the Fascist era, where the regime weaponized colonialism with the intent of valorizing a strong Italic race, asserting that it had to undergo a process of «blood purification»⁸⁹.

A defining characteristic of the Italian colonial trajectory is the rapid dissolution of its imperial holdings, a process that sharply contrasts with the protracted decolonization experienced by other European powers. The Fascist imperial project was dismantled during the terminal stages of the Second World War, with the loss of the remaining territories occurring under the oversight of the post-war international order⁹⁰. These losses were primarily precipitated by the military reversals, as Allied campaigns dismantled Italian hegemony across Eritrea, Somalia, and Libya. While Italy regained a foothold in the Horn of Africa in 1950 via the United Nations Trust Territory of Somaliland⁹¹, the year 1960 marked the finalization of Italy's colonial presence on the continent⁹².

Enduring for nearly eighty years, the colonial project still constitutes one of the most continuous undertakings in modern Italian history, leaving an indelible mark on its political, social, and historical trajectory. Despite this relevance, academics argue that the memory of the Italian colonial parenthesis has been eradicated from the collective consciousness almost immediately after Mussolini's removal from power in 1943, rendering its legacy nearly undetectable in the contemporary national narrative⁹³. This avoidance has resulted in Italy having the slowest decolonization of historical studies, with a consequent effect on museums' ability to rethink their collections, especially considering the scarce provenance information regarding the former colonies⁹⁴. The educational system occupies a central, yet paradoxical, place in diffusing the Italian 'myth of civilization': the reduction of colonial history in scholastic programs, beginning in the 1960s and 1970s, was substituted with the pervasive narrative of "*Italiani brava gente*" (Italians good people), asserting that Italian colonialism was less brutal and fundamentally less racist than the one of other European powers⁹⁵. This

⁸⁸ G. M. Finaldi, *A History of Italian Colonialism, 1860-1907: Europe's Last Empire*, Routledge: Oxford, 2017.

⁸⁹ G. Giuliani, *Mediterraneità e Bianchezza. Il Razzismo italiano tra Fascismo e articolazioni contemporanee (1861-2015)*, in «*Iperstoria*», 2015, p. 169.

⁹⁰ L. de Gruy, *Reframing Culture: The Decolonization and Repatriation Process in the Italian Museum System*, *Honors Theses*, 2023, p. 23.

⁹¹ *United Nations Trust Territory of Somaliland (AFIS)*: It consisted of a UN trust territory in southern Somalia administered by Italy. Established to prepare the region for independence within ten years, before merging with British Somaliland to form the Somali Republic on July 1, 1960.

⁹² P. Poddar, R. S. Patke, L. Jensen, J. Beverley, *Italy and Its Colonies*, in «*A Historical Companion to Postcolonial Literatures: Continental Europe and Its Empires*», Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2011, p. 265.

⁹³ Mellino, *Italy And Postcolonial Studies...*, cit., p. 466.

⁹⁴ Poddar, Patke, Jensen, Beverley, *Italy and Its Colonies...*, cit., p. 286.

⁹⁵ C. Fogu, *Italiani Brava Gente*, in *The Politics of Memory in Postwar Europe*, Durham-London: Duke University Press, 2006, p. 147.

dismissed claim, famously described by historian Angelo Del Boca as «a false myth that has covered and absolved too many abominations»⁹⁶, demonstrates an inconsistency between the official erasure of colonialism and the presentation of the regime that produced it⁹⁷, considering that the extensive violence against populations in the Horn of Africa and the massacres of civilians across Tripolitania, and Cyrenaica, were part of the colonial endeavor before the Fascist era began in 1922⁹⁸.

While a substantial historical reflection on Italy's presence in Africa has been ongoing since the 1970s, «the prevailing attitude among Italian academics seems to consider postcolonialism as a field that [...] is really concerned almost exclusively with the history of 'others'»⁹⁹ making it a marginalized debate within both post-colonial and de-colonial literature until relatively recently¹⁰⁰. The late 1980s saw a pivotal shift, as a new generation of scholars began introducing post-colonial studies into Italian universities, allowing for a connection between the memory of colonialism and issues like massive migration, structural racism, and work exploitation¹⁰¹. While positive shifts toward acknowledging this history have emerged in the last two decades, the sustained lack of accountability has inevitably contributed to the perpetuation of colonial-era racial stereotypes in Italian society¹⁰².

Today, examining the state of ethnographic museums is crucial, particularly as their collections directly confront Italy's changing society. The neglect in which many valuable collections representing physical presence of colonial evidence, consisting of thousands of African objects, find themselves reflect the vast denial that has more generally affected Italy's colonial past¹⁰³.

⁹⁶ A. Del Boca, *Italiani, brava gente? Un mito duro a morire*, Vicenza: Neri Pozza, 2005, p. 315.

⁹⁷ I. Strobbe, *The Decolonisation of the Museum Centring Afro-Italian Presence in the Italian Art System*, Final master thesis, University of Ca' Foscari of Venice, 2022, p. 27.

⁹⁸ Filippi, *Italy's Colonial Past...*, cit.

⁹⁹ Mellino, *Italy And Postcolonial Studies...*, cit., p. 464.

¹⁰⁰ M. Medugno, *The présence Africaine in the Italian academia, Decolonising Modern Languages and Cultures School of Modern Languages*, Newcastle University.

<<https://blogs.ncl.ac.uk/decolonisesml/2021/05/24/the-presence-africaine-in-the-italian-academia/>> (2021) (Last accessed: 22.02.2026).

¹⁰¹ S. Mezzadra, F. Rahola, *The Postcolonial Condition: A Few Notes on the Quality of Historical Time in the Global Present*, «*Reworking Postcolonialism: Globalization, Labour and Rights*», London: Palgrave Macmillan UK, 2015, pp. 36-54.

¹⁰² M. Griffini, *How can you feel guilty for colonialism? it is a folly: colonial memory in the Italian populist radical right*, «*European Politics and Society*», 24(4), 2022, p. 480.

¹⁰³ C. Pennacini, *Cultural decolonization: even Italy rediscovers removed fragments of its past*, in «*Finestre sull'arte*».

<<https://www.finestresullarte.info/en/opinions/cultural-decolonization-even-italy-rediscovers-removed-fragment-s-of-its-past>> (2024) (Last accessed: 22.02.2026).



Fig. 7

Inconscio italiano (Luca Guadagnino, 2011).

On this theme, in 2011 the director Luca Guadagnino created *Inconscio italiano* (Fig. 7), an insightful documentary which focuses on the occupation of Ethiopia during the Fascist era. The work traces the trauma of the colonial past through a psychoanalytic lens, correlating the suppression of this historical trauma, to the political confusion that marked the post-war period regarding the management of colonial cultural heritage¹⁰⁴.

In this regard, the singular most significant event which brought attention to the colonial artifacts still housed on the Italian peninsula can be found in the 2005 repatriation of the Obelisk of *Axum* to Ethiopia, looted during the Fascist period and returned nearly 70 years later¹⁰⁵.

¹⁰⁴ *Inconscio italiano*: The first part of the documentary features six intellectuals (including historians Angelo Del Boca and Lucia Ceci) who analyze the Fascist colonial past with reflections on contemporary Italian identity. The second part presents an edit of archival footage from regime propaganda and Istituto Luce newsreels.

¹⁰⁵ The Guardian, *Obelisk returned to Ethiopia after 68 years*.
<<https://www.theguardian.com/world/2005/apr/20/italy.ethiopia>> (2005) (Last accessed: 22.02.2026).

According to the Constitution, «the Italian legal system conforms to the generally recognised rules of international law»¹⁰⁶ and the legislative power of the State is directly constrained by «international obligations»¹⁰⁷. On a legal perspective, the true definition of a State's approach, whether more "solidaristic" or "nationalistic", lies in how it decides to implement international conventions, particularly Articles 3 and 7(b)(i) of the already cited 1970 UNESCO Convention on the circulation of cultural property, ratified by Italy in 1975, Law No. 873, but without clear definitions on the management of illicitly acquired cultural objects¹⁰⁸. It was based on the obligations assumed under the 1947 Peace Treaty that the restitution to Ethiopia of the Stele of Aksum was legally founded¹⁰⁹. Following the signing of an agreement by the two states in 1997, Ethiopia formed a national committee for the return of the obelisk. The high-profile return of such a massive and politically charged artifact, involving complex logistics and funded by the former colonial power, was seen by many as setting an important precedent¹¹⁰, forcing a public confrontation with a decolonization process that had long remained marginalized in the national discourse¹¹¹. Despite its success, this repatriation ignited a highly polarized political discourse concerning colonial-era crimes, becoming a focal point for ideological contestation and significant friction from conservative factions¹¹².

To date, Italy has not introduced *ad hoc* legislative provisions to facilitate the restitution of property seized during colonial domination, meaning that each potential case remains a politically negotiated event rather than part of an institutionally governed process¹¹³. In this scenario, Italian politics becomes a central matter in the museum environment, further influencing the reorganization of ethnographic collections and the impact of postcolonial demographics on institutional narratives¹¹⁴. Until the mid-1990s, Italian state museums operated under the direct management of national or local governments, entirely lacking an autonomous budget, spending power, or revenue¹¹⁵. This culminated in the Franceschini

¹⁰⁶ Italian Constitution, Art. 10.

¹⁰⁷ Italian Constitution, Art. 117, Para. 1.

¹⁰⁸ A. Visconti, *Legislazione e prassi italiane in materia di beni culturali tra protezionismo e universalismo: Questioni aperte in materia di restituzione di oggetti sottratti nel periodo coloniale*, «*Quellen und Forschungen aus italienischen Archiven und Bibliotheken*», 104(1), 2024, p. 42.

¹⁰⁹ Visconti, *Legislazione e prassi italiane...*, cit., p. 48.

¹¹⁰ UNESCO, *Aksum obelisk returns to Ethiopia*.

¹¹⁰ <https://whc.unesco.org/en/news/116#:~:text=The%20obelisk%20has%20been%20in,to%20be%20flown%20to%20Ethiopia> (2005) (Last accessed: 22.02.2026).

¹¹¹ Griffini, *How can you feel guilty for colonialism?...*, cit., p. 487.

¹¹² Visconti, *Legislazione e prassi italiane...*, cit., p. 53.

¹¹³ *Ibidem*.

¹¹⁴ De Gruy, *Reframing Culture...*, cit., p. 52.

¹¹⁵ M. R. Alfano, A. L. Baraldi, C. Cantabene, *Eppur si muove: an evaluation of museum policy reform in Italy*, «*Journal of Cultural Economics*», 47, 2023, p. 98.

Reform, introduced by Decree n. 171/2014, which aimed to enhance cultural activity and reorganize MiBACT by granting 32 institutions (including *Museo delle Civiltà*) technical-scientific and financial autonomy to achieve their redefined objectives¹¹⁶, offering a mechanism to mitigate the tension in public cultural policy between the need for conservation and the goal of public valorization¹¹⁷. The granting of this autonomy to the *Museo delle Civiltà* (MuCiv), which holds the contested collections of the former Colonial Museum, presents a critical case study, also considering the current right wing political context and the defense of ‘national heritage’ in these parties’ cultural agenda.

2.2)

1914-1956:

DISPLAY AND PURPOSE OF THE COLONIAL MUSEUM IN ROME

The consolidation of the nation-state in Italy, its colonial enterprise, and the subsequent efforts to forge a ‘unitarian identity’ in the second half of the nineteenth century are intimately bound together. Within this socio-political fabric, the museum emerged as a primary site for the articulation of a nascent public culture and the deliberate construction of national selfhood. The proliferation of colonial museums was conceived to function as metropolitan showcases for Italy’s overseas ambitions. Notably, this ‘imperial imaginary’ was not confined to urban centers but permeated a heterogeneous network of institutions, extending to peripheral rural locales, each curating a localized interpretation of the colonial project¹¹⁸. This decentralized approach served to indoctrinate the provincial public, functioning as crucial spaces where knowledge was both produced and transmitted¹¹⁹. The museum, therefore, functioned as a physical and ideological instrument for solidifying this narrative of civilizing mission in the national consciousness¹²⁰. That is also evident by the fact

¹¹⁶ Alfano, Baraldi, Cantabene, *Eppur si muove...*, cit., pp. 101-102.

¹¹⁷ *Ivi*, p. 124.

¹¹⁸ B. Falcucci, *Bringing the Empire to the Provinces: Colonial Museums and Colonial Knowledge in Fascist Italy*, «*Cahiers François Viète*», 3(10), 2021, p. 115.

¹¹⁹ Falcucci, *Bringing the Empire...*, cit., p. 115.

¹²⁰ B. Falcucci, *A repository of colonial intervisuality and memory: the Colonial Museum in Rome*, «*Revue d’histoire culturelle*», 6, 2023, p. 5.

that over 90 museums spread throughout the Italian Peninsula housed colonial collections, and as Falcucci notes, many continue to do so¹²¹.

Established in 1914 as a specialized branch of the Ministry of the Colonies, the *Museo Coloniale* underwent its formal investiture in 1923 within the setting of the *Palazzo della Consulta*. This opening, occurring in the foundational years of the Mussolini government, signaled the regime's intent to weaponize cultural heritage as a means of imperial legitimation. Following the example of other colonial institutions, the *Museo Coloniale* enforced Mussolini's mission of binding Italians together through a nationalistic «colonial consciousness»¹²² and heavily promoted trade fair activity, which evolved into the autonomous institution known as the *Mostra Campionaria Permanente* (Permanent Sampling Exhibition)¹²³. Essentially, the museum's commercial operation aimed to validate Italy's colonial claims in Africa by proving their economic viability, thereby encouraging Italians to 'retake their place' among the established European empires. Furthermore, the museum frequently functioned as a performative space for the reception of foreign dignitaries and mediation of colonial relations, as evidenced by the June 1924 visit of Ras Tafari¹²⁴, alongside Benito Mussolini and Museum Director Umberto Giglio (Fig. 8). Additional evidence of the original display confirms that the museum resembled a cabinet of curiosities, presenting the colony through an uncontextualized assemblage of materials: documents, treatises, paintings, raw materials (placed in bottles and cases), ethnographic objects, and weapons (Fig. 9)¹²⁵. The curatorial design served as a deliberately overwhelming spectacle where objects were presented with an absence of scientific accompanying text¹²⁶. The walls were used as propaganda space, covered with anthropometric pictures of African 'characters' and weapons seized from the indigenous populations to celebrate the «exploits of Italian explorers or soldiers»¹²⁷.

¹²¹ Falcucci, *Bringing the Empire...*, cit., p. 124.

¹²² *Ivi*, p. 126.

¹²³ *Mostra Campionaria Permanente*: The event was designed to promote the Italian colonies at international fairs and to maintain a stock of materials for exhibitions across Italy. The *Mostra* displayed samples of African raw materials (cotton, rubber, resins, woods, animal skins) alongside the products manufactured by Italian industries to tangibly demonstrate the successful utilization of colonial resources.

¹²⁴ *Ras Tafari Makonnen (1892-1975)*: He was the last Emperor of Ethiopia, reigning as Haile Selassie I from 1930 to 1974.

¹²⁵ R. A. Di Lella, *Unveiled Storages. How to Imagine a De-Colonial Museum?*.

<<https://takingcareproject.eu/article/unveiled-storages-how-to-imagine-a-de-colonial-museum>> (Last accessed: 22.02.2026).

¹²⁶ Di Lella, *Unveiled Storages...*, cit.

¹²⁷ *Le collezioni dell'ex Museo coloniale di Roma al MuCiv*.

<<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vXKfKYcyeRc&t=398s>> (2025) (Last accessed: 22.02.2026).



Fig. 8

Ras Tafari, Benito Mussolini and Umberto Giglio in front of the Colonial Museum, Rome, 1924¹²⁸.

Fig. 9

A room of the Colonial Museum, Rome, 1923¹²⁹.

¹²⁸ Image source: National Central Library of Rome, Inventory no. 2570.

<<https://www.esteri.it/it/uapsds/archivio-storico-e-biblioteca/mostre-iniziativa-e-comunicazione/newsletter-biblioteca-e-archivio-storico/>> (Last accessed: 22.02.2026).

¹²⁹ Image source: B. Falcucci, *Bringing the Empire...*, cit.

The lack of archival rigor has resulted in a significant historical void, consistent with the erasure of colonial subjects in Italian history, including almost no information on who collected the objects, in what context, and for what purpose¹³⁰. In 1932, the museum was moved to a more prestigious location on Via Aldrovandi, near the Zoological Garden and *Villa Borghese*. Finally, from 1935, Mussolini inaugurated the new exhibition, marking the point where the museum, at least architectonically, seemed to match the regime's high expectations (Fig. 10, 11)¹³¹.

Following the major imperial expansion, the museum was renamed *Museo dell'Africa Italiana* (Museum of Italian Africa), mirroring the declaration of the Empire of Italian Africa in 1936. The new exhibition galleries closed by the summer of 1937 to facilitate a comprehensive inventory audit and structural renovation. By 1938, a formal inventory was completed, which would serve as the primary record for all acquisitions through 1954¹³². During this period, the Fascist regime planned to establish a singular, central colonial museum that would be housed in a massive seven-story building designed for the renamed Ministry of the Colonies, now the *Ministero dell'Africa Italiana*. The regime's desire to consolidate the official colonial narrative under one overarching, state-controlled institution is evident in the archives of existing provincial museums that held colonial collections¹³³. These smaller institutions began to experience progressive marginalization between 1935 and 1940, since the vast majority of objects originating were destined for the central museum¹³⁴. In 1939, prompted by the logistical necessity of accommodating the vast ethnographic and commercial collections arriving from Ethiopia, an additional exhibition hall was constructed. Such a move was designed to accommodate the growing collection while simultaneously providing a setting that could adequately project Italy's newly proclaimed imperial status¹³⁵. The monumental entrance was heavily influenced by the spectacle of the great Fascist exhibitions, signaling the institution's renewed imperial purpose and setting the tone by prominently displaying weapons and insignia stolen from the indigenous enemy.

¹³⁰ Di Lella, *Unveiled Storages...*, cit.

¹³¹ Falcucci, *Bringing the Empire...*, cit., p. 126.

¹³² L. Declich, *L'archivio del Museo coloniale di Roma (1891-2012), Unità di Analisi, Programmazione, Statistica e Documentazione Storica Archivio Storico Diplomatico*, Ministero degli Affari Esteri e della Cooperazione Internazionale, 2025, p. 8.

¹³³ Falcucci, *Bringing the Empire...*, cit., p. 129.

¹³⁴ G. Delpino, *Un museo di propaganda, un museo chiuso e occultato, un museo da rimeditare e riaprire: dal Museo coloniale al Museo italo africano "Ilaria Alpi"*.

<https://www.asiafrica.org/blacklivesmatter-italia-asai/un-museo-di-propaganda-un-museo-chiuso-e-occultato-un-museo-da-rimeditare-e-riaprire-dal-museo-coloniale-al-museo-italo-africano-ilaria-alpi/> (Last accessed: 22.02.2026).

¹³⁵ De Gruy, *Reframing Culture...*, cit., p. 44.

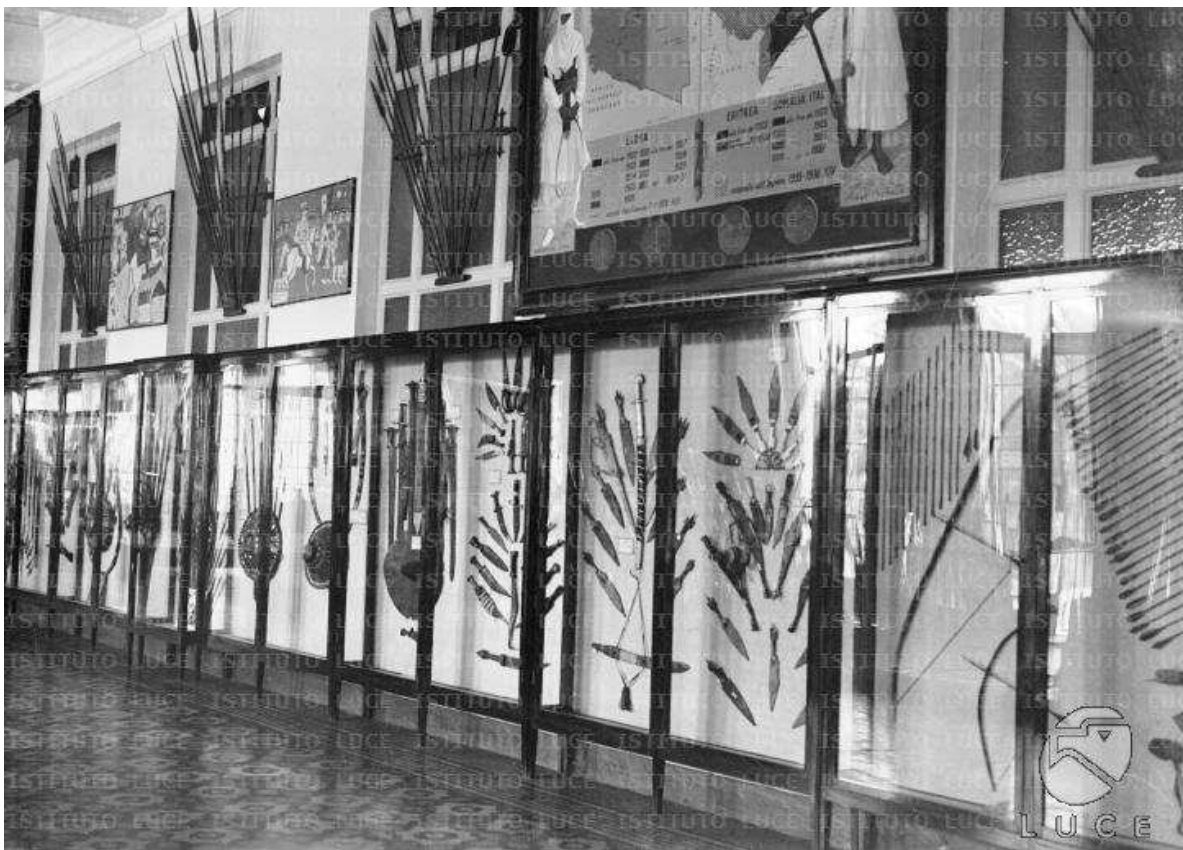
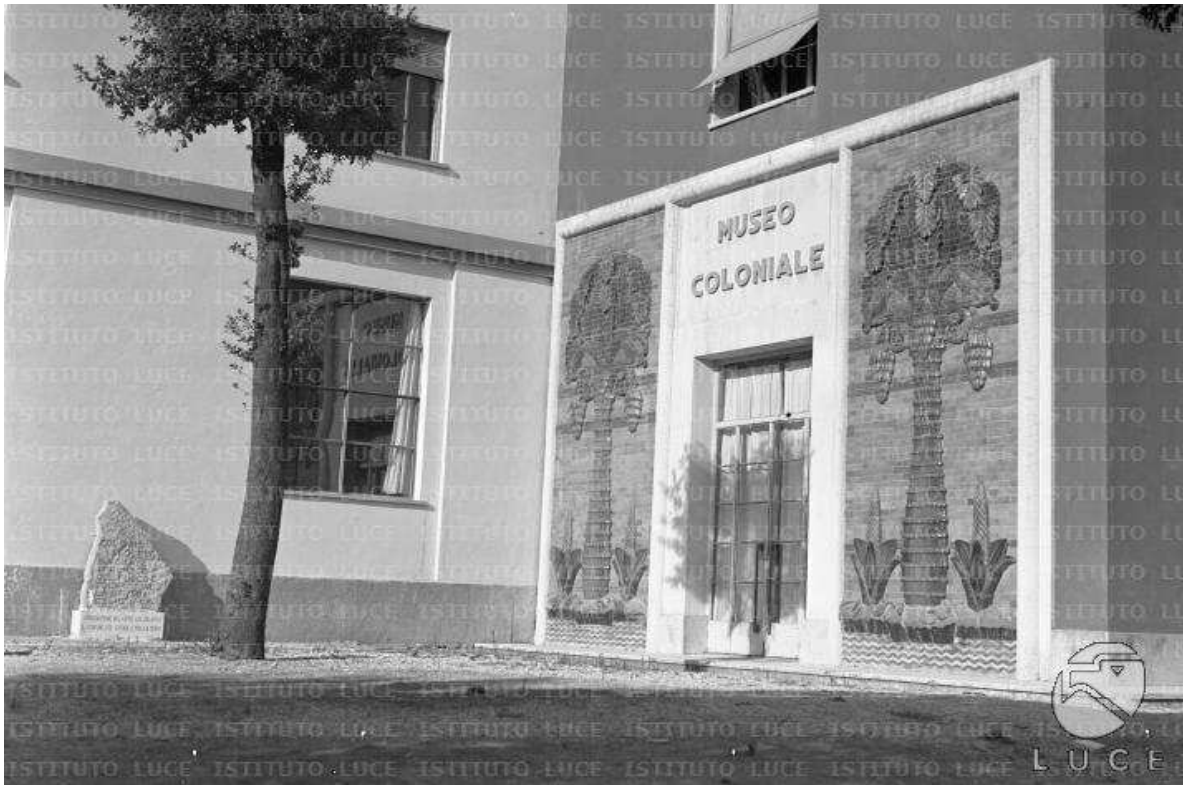


Fig. 10, 11

Inauguration of new galleries, Colonial Museum, Rome, 1937¹³⁶.

¹³⁶ Image source: <<https://www.archivioluce.com/>> (Last accessed: 22.02.2026).

Following the declaration of the Italian Empire after the conquest of Ethiopia, the *Museo Coloniale* was renamed the *Museo dell'Impero d'Italia* (Museum of the Italian Empire). The museum's new nomenclature was ratified in 1940 alongside a revised set of regulations as a Royal Decree¹³⁷. Article 1 of this mandate defined the institution's primary objective as the «collection and display of all materials pertaining to the conquest, civilization, and development of the lands of Italian Africa»¹³⁸. Structurally, the institution maintained its dual identity as both a museum and a trade fair. Under Article 5, the immense collection of up to 11,700 finds was systematically categorized into eight distinct sections: prehistoric and archaeological, military-historical, numismatics and medals, ethnographic, economic and social, artistic, photographic and cinematographic, and philatelic¹³⁹.

The institutional trajectory of the museum in the immediate post-war era was still fundamentally colonial, being centered on the preservation of Italian interests in Africa. The denomination of Colonial Museum was, once again, utilized from 1947 to 1956¹⁴⁰. However, this period also inaugurated a profound phase of institutional oblivion. The systematic dispersal of wartime collections to various military repositories, coupled with a reduction in public exhibition space, signaled a retreat from the unified display originally envisioned by the Fascist regime¹⁴¹. Between 1953 and 1955, following the suppression of the Ministry, the administration of both the Research Office and the Museum was transferred to the Presidency of the Council of Ministers under the Office of Affairs of the Suppressed Ministry of Italian Africa¹⁴². Throughout the 1950s and early 1960s, the institution maintained a degree of activity, using its collections in events such as the *Fiera del Levante* in Bari and the *Fiera del Mediterraneo* in Palermo, also organizing festivals of African films¹⁴³. From 1956 to 1995, management was entrusted to the Italian Institute for Africa¹⁴⁴ and was later renamed the Italo-African Institute as the museum permanently closed in 1971. Finally, from 1995 to 2012, the Museum transitioned to the Italian Institute for Africa and the Orient (IsIAO), established through the merger with the Institute for the Middle and Far East (IsMEO). Following these decades of fragmentation and the dissolution of the IsIAO via a joint

¹³⁷ R. D. November 25, 1940, n. 1970, *Nuovo regolamento per il Museo dell'Africa italiana* (*Gazzetta Ufficiale*, february 13, 1941, n. 38).

¹³⁸ R. D. 1979/40, Art. 1.

¹³⁹ R. D. 1979/40, Art. 5.

¹⁴⁰ Declich, *L'archivio del Museo coloniale di Roma...*, cit., p. 8.

¹⁴¹ Delpino, *Un museo di propaganda...*, cit.

¹⁴² Declich, *L'archivio del Museo coloniale di Roma...*, cit., p. 1.

¹⁴³ Falcucci, *A repository of colonial...*, cit., p. 12.

¹⁴⁴ *Italian Institute for Africa (IIPLA, 1947-1971)*: The entity evolved from the Fascist Institute of Italian Africa (IFAI, 1937-1947), the Fascist Colonial Institute (ICF, 1928-1937), and the Italian Colonial Institute (ICI, 1906-1927).

directive from the Ministry of Economy and Finance and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of 2011, the Museum's holdings and the Institute's legacy were dispersed across several institutions. The physical artifacts were transferred to the *Museo delle Civiltà* in Rome in 2012, the archival records were deposited at the Historical Diplomatic Archives of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, while the library collections, photographs, cartographic materials, and historical documents pertaining to colonial explorers were relocated to the National Central Library of Rome (BNCR)¹⁴⁵.

Focusing on the holdings curated at the *Museo delle Civiltà*, the collection continues to undergo a process of expansion, largely driven by private donations from the descendants of former Italian residents in Libya, Eritrea, Somalia, and Ethiopia¹⁴⁶. These acquisitions reflect a burgeoning effort among colonial families to institutionalize the material vestiges of Italy's imperial history. Currently, the repository is distributed across 50,000 square meters of exhibition and storage facilities within Rome's EUR district, a site of profound historical significance. Originally commissioned by the Mussolini regime as the venue for the aborted 1942 World's Fair, the district's architecture serves as a monumentalized expression of fascist aspirations, thereby embedding the colonial collection within a physical landscape designed to legitimize imperial expansion¹⁴⁷. The 2022 relaunch of the *Museo delle Civiltà* (MuCiv), under the directorship of art historian Andrea Viliani, inaugurated a transformative four-year operational and curatorial mandate. This strategic pivot prioritizes a radical museographic reconfiguration, seeking to establish a new cultural paradigm centered on rigorous research, comprehensive digitalization, and the critical deconstruction of historical narratives¹⁴⁸.

Additionally, the long-awaited opening marked the completion of a merger process involving several existing museums, the former Colonial Museum, the *Museo Preistorico ed Etnografico Luigi Pigorini*, the former National Museum of Oriental Art, and those of popular arts and traditions originating from the Exhibition of Italian Ethnography¹⁴⁹. The collections preserved are distinguished by their extraordinary historical stratification, spanning fields from prehistory and paleontology to extra-European arts, and Italian popular traditions. This heterogeneity is rooted in the materials' diverse origins, yet they share a common ideological foundation stemming from the positivist and classificatory culture of the

¹⁴⁵ Declich, *L'archivio del Museo coloniale di Roma...*, cit., p. 15.

¹⁴⁶ G. Delpino, R. A. Di Lella, *Opening, Sharing and Collaborating. An ongoing process on the colonial collections of the Museo delle Civiltà, Roma*, «MUSEA. Journal for Museology, Museum Practice and Audience», 2, 2024, p. 146.

¹⁴⁷ *Museo delle civiltà*.

<<https://www.museodelleciviltà.it/>> (Last accessed: 22.02.2026).

¹⁴⁸ *Ibidem*.

¹⁴⁹ *Ibidem*.

19th and 20th centuries¹⁵⁰. Given this inherent complexity, the structural and narrative reorganization of the MuCiv serves as a definitive case study for both the Italian post-colonial landscape and international museum studies. The institution's significance is underscored by its role as the primary custodian of the nation's colonial archives, a critical responsibility in a domestic context characterized by a marked scarcity of formal decolonial initiatives.

2.3)

THE 2022 INSTITUTIONAL REFRAME: POLITICAL AND ECONOMICAL CONTEXT

To properly investigate the institutional developments that culminated in the 2022 reopening of MuCiv, this analysis will begin its examination from 2020, year in which, on May 25, the museum initiated the discussion on its major collection rearrangement via a virtual press conference¹⁵¹. This event served to finally announce the creation of a new museum space intended to house the collections of the former Colonial Museum slated for display in 2021, the *Museo Italo Africano Ilaria Alpi*¹⁵². Beside a statement by the Italo-Somali writer Igiaba Scego, the event was characterized by an absence of specialists in colonial history, postcolonial and decolonial studies, as well as experts from the former colonies themselves¹⁵³. This lack of diverse scholarly input initially put in question the institution's commitment to a genuine decolonization of its narrative, underscoring a possible discrepancy between the language adopted and the persistent internal structure of the institution¹⁵⁴.

Reframing the critical points that have arisen from this first presentation, Rosa Anna Di Lella, one of the curators of the new museological project, have responded by acknowledging these concerns but, more relevantly, by setting a different purpose statement emphasizing the

¹⁵⁰ A. Viliani, *Quali Civiltà? Lettera del direttore sul nuovo programma del Museo delle Civiltà*, in «Il nuovo programma del museo delle civiltà», MuCiv Press release, 2022, p. 1.

¹⁵¹ Falcucci, *A repository of colonial...*, cit., p. 13.

¹⁵² *Ilaria Alpi*: She was an Italian TG3 journalist killed in Mogadishu in 1994. Alpi and her cameraman, Miran Hrovatin, were the victims of a targeted ambush while investigating an international trafficking ring involving arms and illegal toxic waste between Somalia and Europe.

¹⁵³ *Museo Italo-Africano "Ilaria Alpi"*.

<<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=F4obZIAecsw>> (2020) (Last accessed: 22.02.2026).

¹⁵⁴ A. Ferrini, *White Tinted Glasses: on the 'difficult heritage' of Italian colonialism*, in «Journal of Visual Culture & Harun Farocki Institute».

<<https://www.harun-farocki-institut.org/de/2020/06/17/white-tinted-glasses-on-the-difficult-heritage-of-italian-colonialism-journal-of-visual-culture-hafi-31/>> (2020) (Last accessed: 22.02.2026).

necessity of reflecting concretely on the «consequences of colonialism, with a look at the contemporary world and the production of economic imbalances, demographic movements, and different access to resources that have their roots in the colonial era»¹⁵⁵.

On a larger, global scale, the press conference unfolded simultaneously with the brutal assassination of George Floyd in the United States. This event drastically heightened global scrutiny on racial justice, propelling the Black Lives Matter movement and fostering widespread protests against systemic racism. This global and domestic awakening has intensified demands for confronting Italy's own 'difficult heritage'. Despite these emerging actions, discussions in Italy regarding monuments and contested memory have often been limited to Fascist architecture, frequently dissociating them from the regime's racist politics and colonial violence¹⁵⁶.

Following a period of critical transition, the year 2022 solidified the definitive institutional pivot for MuCiv, signaled by the appointment of Andrea Viliani as director and the subsequent ratification of a quadrennial operational and curatorial mandate. Central to this revitalization is the 'Great *Museo delle Civiltà* Project', an initiative articulated by Viliani, alongside the curators already in charge of the research activities regarding the former colonial collection, to re-engineer the institution's foundational methodologies. This project envisions a transformation that transcends mere renovation, seeking to align the gradual reopening of the museum's diverse sections with a profound epistemological shift in how the collections are curated and perceived¹⁵⁷.

At first glance, the appointment of Andrea Viliani, a curator and art historian deeply rooted in the contemporary art scene, to lead an ethnographic institution like the MuCiv may appear as an unconventional institutional choice. Viliani's professional trajectory, defined by his tenure at prominent contemporary art venues such as the MADRE Museum in Naples, the *Castello di Rivoli* and the *Galleria Civica di Trento*¹⁵⁸, is fundamental to deciphering the museum's new strategic direction. His background suggests a deliberate move toward an intersectional

¹⁵⁵ V. Gravano, G. Grechi, *Mostrare una collezione coloniale: riflessioni sul futuro riallestimento al Museo delle Civiltà di Roma*, Interview with Rosa Anna Di Lella. <<https://www.roots-routes.org/mostrare-una-collezione-coloniale-riflessioni-sul-futuro-riallestimento-al-museo-delle-civiltà-di-roma-intervista-a-rosa-anna-di-lella-a-cura-di-viviana-gravano-e-giulia-grechi/>> (2020) (Last accessed: 22.02.2026).

¹⁵⁶ Ferrini, *White Tinted Glasses...*, cit.

¹⁵⁷ Viliani, *Quali Civiltà?...*, cit., p. 1.

¹⁵⁸ *Ministero della Cultura, Curriculum Vitae of Andrea Viliani*.

<https://media.beniculturali.it/mibac/files/boards/388a5474724a15af0ace7a40ab3301de/file_pdf/CV/CV_Andrea_Viliani_2022.pdf> (Last accessed: 22.02.2026).

curatorial model, utilizing contemporary methodologies to facilitate the critical recontextualization of the museum's sensitive and contested repositories.

The administrative transition at the MuCiv became a focal point for a broader ideological conflict regarding the role of national heritage in the twenty-first century.

Viliani's appointment was met with significant institutional friction, characterized by detractors as a turn toward 'contemporary activism' and subjected to rigorous interrogation within the Italian Senate, directed to the Ministry of Culture¹⁵⁹. The debate intensified following the Director's assertion that the MuCiv's reorganization would adopt a 'subversive' posture toward conventional museological functions. By repositioning the institution as «a place of reflection» (*riflessione*) rather than a place of «showing» (*mostra*)¹⁶⁰, Viliani challenged the traditional hegemony of the exhibitionary complex. Critics contend that opposing 'reflection' and 'exhibition' undermines the museum's foundational mandate; they further posit that the perceived marginalization of historical collections in favor of contemporary interventions risks eroding the institution's scientific and pedagogical rigor, potentially reducing a national repository to a «second-tier contemporary art gallery»¹⁶¹.

The discursive friction surrounding MuCiv's trajectory underscores a broader resistance within the Italian public and political spheres toward the adoption of non-linear narratives. Consequently, the MuCiv's primary challenge is not merely logistical, such as the material repatriation of artifacts, but profoundly pedagogical. It necessitates the cultivation of a new mode of spectatorship capable of engaging with unresolved histories without perceiving the deconstruction process as a threat to national identity. As Viliani has frequently asserted, museum collections must remain inextricably linked to the most pressing socio-political exigencies of the contemporary world¹⁶², necessitating a realignment of research methodologies to address, for instance, ecological precarity and the systemic decolonization of institutional infrastructures¹⁶³.

This next analysis, drawn from an open letter of 2024 by the *Fp Cgil Roma Lazio* labor organization, examines the performance metrics of MuCiv under the leadership of Viliani,

¹⁵⁹ D.D.L. 18 December 2022, S. 2684, *Ratifica adesione Finlandia e Svezia al Trattato del Nord Atlantico*, Senato della Repubblica, XVIII Legislatura, pp. 159-160.

¹⁶⁰ *Ibidem*.

¹⁶¹ M. Oi, *Lettera Aperta Alle Istituzioni Sul Museo Delle Civiltà*.

<<https://www.fpcgilromalazio.it/2024/11/19/lettera-aperta-alle-istituzioni-sul-museo-delle-civiltà/>> (2024) (Last accessed: 22.02.2026).

¹⁶² Viliani, *Quali Civiltà?...*, cit., p. 2.

¹⁶³ M. C. Valacchi, *Il museo è una responsabilità civile e politica*, Interview with Andrea Viliani.

<<https://www.elledecor.com/it/arte/a44864099/il-museo-e-una-responsabilita-civile-e-politica/>> (2023) (Last accessed: 22.02.2026).

highlighting the concerns raised by institutional stakeholders and the cultural sector. The data, published by the Ministry of Culture's Directorate General for Budget, appears to propose critiques concerning the management of the institution.

The core argument against the current direction rests on quantitative evidence of institutional instability, contrasting with the general growth observed across Italy's autonomous museums and archaeological parks. Critiques of the direction have expanded beyond methodological concerns to include its fiscal trajectory, interrogating the museum's financial efficacy relative to the substantial funds received over a three-year period. These investments, totaling between 8 and 10 million euros, represent a significant influx of extraordinary resources¹⁶⁴. As the MuCiv's annual operating budget is primarily employed for fixed expenditures, the institution has become increasingly reliant on supplementary funding streams, such as the National Recovery and Resilience Plan (PNRR) funds¹⁶⁵ (assigned for enhancing both physical and cognitive accessibility, alongside structural safety and infrastructure) and Ministerial Investment Funds. Furthermore, the museum has adopted a proactive stance in mobilizing third-sector contributions and private patronage, utilizing mechanisms such as the ArtBonus platform to augment its developmental capacity¹⁶⁶.

Despite a substantial influx of capital investment, the MuCiv's 2023 fiscal performance, reaching a net revenue of only €70,941, reflects a marked contraction compared to previously registered benchmarks. This downturn is most acute in the museum's attendance data, which recorded a mere 39,946 visitors in 2023, of which only 19.6% were revenue-generating. This represents a significant statistical retrogression from the 2016-2019 period, when visitor traffic consistently fluctuated between 50,000 and 70,000. This discrepancy suggests a systemic crisis in visitor engagement, indicating that while the institution has prioritized internal methodological reform, it has struggled to achieve public resonance during the post-pandemic recovery, a period in which other autonomous Italian museums demonstrated robust growth¹⁶⁷.

¹⁶⁴ L. Bison, *Come sono andati i musei autonomi italiani nel 2023*.

<<https://www.finestresullarte.info/focus/come-sono-andati-i-musei-autonomi-italiani-nel-2023>> (2024) (Last accessed: 22.02.2026).

¹⁶⁵ PNRR: Italy's National Recovery and Resilience Plan is funded by the European Union's NextGenerationEU program. It is a strategic roadmap to modernize the country's economy, infrastructure, and social fabric following the COVID-19 pandemic.

¹⁶⁶ G. Basili, *Un museo decoloniale e multispecie. Parla Andrea Viliani, neo direttore del Museo delle Civiltà*. <<https://www.arttribune.com/professionisti-e-professionisti/2022/07/andrea-viliani-museo-delle-civiltà-roma/>> (2022) (Last accessed: 22.02.2026).

¹⁶⁷ Oi, *Lettera Aperta Alle Istituzioni...*, cit.

The decline in visitor numbers illustrates a temporary rupture in audience alignment. When an institution abandons a traditional exhibition model in favor of a critical approach, it alienates its legacy audience before it has fully secured a new, critical public. While the revenue deficit may initially suggest a crisis in institutional management, this disparity cannot be ascribed solely to the current administration's curatorial pivot. Rather, as the subsequent chapter will investigate, the MuCiv's diminished attendance is the result of a complex convergence of structural, architectural, and sociopolitical pressures. The MuCiv's highly stratified situation thus becomes a foundational example for understanding the contemporary challenges and theoretical demands of complex museums systems. The transition of a legacy institution like the MuCiv involves more than a physical renovation; it requires the cultivation of a new curatorial voice and a decolonial narrative which, by necessity, must be tested, debated, and refined through sustained engagement with diverse stakeholders, including descendant communities, scholars, and the visiting public.

CHAPTER 3)

CURATING COMPLEXITY: NEW ITINERARIES FOR A REIMAGINED INSTITUTION

3.1)

MUSEO DELLE CIVILTÀ: A LABORATORY FOR DECOLONIAL PRACTICE

Fifty years after the original institution was closed to the public, the former colonial collection has re-emerged within a sociopolitical landscape increasingly defined by postcolonial scrutiny. At MuCiv, inventorying and archival reassessments have enabled a hermeneutic approach to the collection's dual ontologies. On one hand, each artifact is treated as a material witness to the ideological structures of the Italian imperial project. On the other hand, the archival lacunae are now being reinterpreted as evidence of the colonial system's inherent opacity and its mechanisms of erasure¹⁶⁸.

Since 2017, several initiatives within MuCiv have explored the complexities of the museum's colonial holdings. A primary milestone was the European project 'TRACES'¹⁶⁹, which supported a six-month residency for anthropologist Arnd Schneider and artist Leone Contini. As the first stage of a broader reflection on Italian colonial history, Contini and Schneider examined the collections of the former IsIAO¹⁷⁰, which include the holdings of the African Colonial Museum. This research culminated in the exhibition '*Bel suol d'amore: The Scattered Colonial Body*', a project that utilized contested artifacts, such as busts of Italian imperial generals connected to the colonial project (Fig. 12), plaster casts and historical photographs, to highlight the links between archives and private family records, including Contini's own family heritage, him being a descendant of Italian settlers to Libya¹⁷¹.

¹⁶⁸ Delpino, Di Lella, *Opening, Sharing and Collaborating...*, cit., p. 148.

¹⁶⁹ *TRACES*: It is a three-year project funded in 2016 by the European Commission as part of the Horizon 2020 Research and Innovation Programme.

¹⁷⁰ *IsIAO*: Italian Institute for Africa and the East.

¹⁷¹ A. Schneider, *Art-Anthropology Interventions in the Italian Post-Colony: The Scattered Colonial Body Project*, «*Across Anthropology: Troubling Colonial Legacies, Museums, and the Curatorial*», Leuven University Press, 2020, p. 224.



Fig. 12

Leone Contini, *The scattered colonial body*, MuCiv, Rome, 2017¹⁷².

Fig. 13

Scale model of Sabratha (Libya, first half of the 20th century), MuCiv, Rome¹⁷³.

¹⁷² Images source: <<https://www.localesproject.org/leone-contini-talk/>> (Last accessed: 22.02.2026).

¹⁷³ Images source: <<https://www.roots-routes.org/leone-contini/>> (Last accessed: 22.02.2026).

During a survey of the museum archives, the artists encountered a scale model of *Sabratha* (Fig. 13), an archaeological site of a Roman amphitheater in Libya, excavated by Contini's grandfather, Giacomo Caputo, a superintendent of antiquities in Libya in the 1940s. This discovery highlighted how intimate memories of Italian colonialism intertwine with the official record of history¹⁷⁴. Among the most controversial objects are 40 plaster face masks, casts of Libyan people made by Italian anthropologists during the 1920s and 30s, such as Lidio Cipriani¹⁷⁵, a leading anthropologist of the Fascist era¹⁷⁶. The installation enabled the museum to become a dual-purpose space: an ethnographic field site and an artistic laboratory aiming to spark a critical reflection on Italian colonialism by connecting public history with private memory¹⁷⁷. In the researchers' view, it is within this sphere of vulnerability that individuals craft the narratives used to recontextualized broader ideological movements¹⁷⁸.

By 2021, the institution expanded its reach by facilitating collaborative engagement between activists, researchers, and the museum's professional staff. A manifestation of this methodology was the 'EUR(H)OPE' project, which employed critical exploration to interrogate the EUR district. By utilizing artistic interventions to challenge the neighborhood's Fascist-era monumentalism, the museum's decolonial mission was grounded in the physical reality of the city (Fig. 14)¹⁷⁹.

Signaling the further museum's attempt to open a public dialogue, in 2021, a temporary project titled 'Unveiled Storages' (*Depositì Aperti*)¹⁸⁰ was launched, allowing visitors to explore through a guided visit a selection of colonial objects. This long-term project adopted a self-reflexive strategy, in which the objects were put on display using their 19th-century cabinets, but the artifacts were symbolically wrapped in cellophane. The participatory laboratory, continuing throughout 2022 and involving open consultations, book presentations, and conferences, aimed to initiate the process for a permanent exhibition¹⁸¹.

¹⁷⁴ Delpino, Di Lella, *Opening, Sharing and Collaborating...*, cit., p. 152.

¹⁷⁵ Lidio Cipriani (1892-1962): He was a key figure in the regime's racial policies, being a signatory of the 1938 Manifesto of Race (*Manifesto della Razza*).

¹⁷⁶ L. Contini, *Bel Suol d'Amore – The Scattered Colonial Body*, Press release, in «Exibart».

<<https://www.exibart.com/evento-arte/leone-contini-bel-suol-damore-the-scattered-colonial-body/>> (2017) (Last accessed: 22.02.2026).

¹⁷⁷ L. Contini, *Bel Suol d'Amore...*, cit.

¹⁷⁸ G. Grechi, *The scattered colonial body, Leone Contini e la collezione coloniale del Museo Pigorini*, in «ROOTS&ROUTES Research on Visual Cultures».

<<https://www.roots-routes.org/the-scattered-colonial-body-leone-contini-e-la-collezione-coloniale-del-museo-pigorini-di-giulia-grechi/>> (Last accessed: 22.02.2026).

¹⁷⁹ EUR(H)OPE project.

<<https://www.localesproject.org/en/eurhope/>> (Last accessed: 22.02.2026).

¹⁸⁰ Falcucci, *A repository of colonial...*, cit., p. 14.

¹⁸¹ *Museo delle civiltà, Depositì Aperti*.

<<https://www.museodelleciviltà.it/depositi-aperti-news/>> (Last accessed: 22.02.2026).



Fig. 14

EUR(H)OPE, *Stalker*, EUR District, Rome, 2021¹⁸².

As previously stated, the appointment of Andrea Viliani as Director marked a pivotal shift in the MuCiv's approach to its colonial holdings. Under his leadership, the museum has adopted contemporary artistic languages to foster a participatory rewriting of its collections. In line with this path, the new management launched the first Research Fellowships, long-term programs which invite international artists to develop autonomous projects focusing on the museum's archives, steering the reflection on certain terminologies, such as the word 'Oriental' or the concept of 'primitive'¹⁸³. Consequently, in Viliani's view, the results of each artist's respective research will not be predetermined by the institution but will be defined by the artists themselves, underscoring a process-based and open approach¹⁸⁴.

¹⁸² Image source: <<https://www.localesproject.org/en/eurhope/>> (Last accessed: 22.02.2026).

¹⁸³ *Presentation of the Museo delle Civiltà's New 2022 Program*.
<<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=iwnat4ABrY8>> (Last accessed: 22.02.2026).

¹⁸⁴ Basili, *Un museo decoloniale e multispecie...*, cit.

Opened in 2023, *Museo delle Opacità* (Museum of Opacities)¹⁸⁵ represents the ultimate culmination of the residency program and the biggest experimental public display of these collections since the museum's closure. This multidisciplinary effort spans themes of restitution, state-sponsored violence, and the 'civilizing' myths of the past, drawing on the expertise of scholars across fields, from archaeology and linguistics to postcolonial studies, to foster a rigorous, multivocal re-examination of history¹⁸⁶.

3.2)

NEW CURATORIAL PERSPECTIVES: THE SERIES OF *MUSEO DELLE OPACITÀ*

As mentioned in chapter two, MuCiv has positioned contemporary art as the central methodological tool in its institutional decolonization effort, directly informing the ongoing narrative restructuring evident in projects like the *Museo delle Opacità*. Curated by Gaia Delpino, Rosa Anna Di Lella (Cultural Anthropologists) and Matteo Lucchetti (Curator for Contemporary Arts and Cultures), the exhibition juxtaposes former colonial holdings with contemporary interventions from artists, activists, and researchers. The term 'opacities' carries in itself a dual critical meaning: it refers to the veil of amnesia that has concealed the key narratives of the Italian colonial era and invokes the concept theorized by poet Édouard Glissant¹⁸⁷, who defined it as the right of individuals not to subject their identity to frameworks of 'acceptance' but instead to anchor identity in practices of sharing¹⁸⁸.

The conceptual framework of the *Museo delle Opacità*'s series is intentionally structured as an experimental 'work in progress', serving as a tangible reflection of the collaborative networks established between curators, artists, activists, and researchers. This procedural

¹⁸⁵ *Museo delle Civiltà, Museo delle Opacità. Documentare la complessità del passato coloniale, ricercarla nel presente, condividerla per il futuro.*

<<https://www.museodelleciviltà.it/riallestimenti/museo-delle-opacità-documentare-la-complessità-del-passato-coloniale-ricercarla-nel-presente-condividerla-per-il-futuro/>> (2023) (Last accessed: 22.02.2026).

¹⁸⁶ Delpino, Di Lella, *Opening, Sharing and Collaborating...*, cit., p. 152.

¹⁸⁷ *Édouard Glissant (1928-2011)*: He was a highly influential Martinican poet, philosopher, and cultural theorist known for his profound writings on identity, colonialism, globalization, and cultural hybridity, challenging simplistic views of Caribbean and African diaspora cultures. Édouard Glissant attended the 2nd World Congress of Black Writers and Artists in Rome in 1959.

¹⁸⁸ *Museo delle Civiltà, Museo delle Opacità...*, cit.

approach has facilitated the gradual reopening of the former colonial collections, utilizing a series of three iterative chapters (with the current completion of the first two: *Museo delle Opacità* and *Museo delle Opacità #2. Architetture e agricolture coloniali*) to ensure institutional transparency and sustained accessibility during a period of extensive structural renovation. These temporary interventions and installations have served as a critical laboratory and dialogue setting for the forthcoming permanent exhibition. Indeed, a significant portion of the contemporary artworks commissioned over the past two years has been formally acquired through the 2021-2022 Plan for Contemporary Art (PAC), an initiative of the Ministry of Culture's General Directorate for Contemporary Creativity¹⁸⁹, and will be integrated into the museum's permanent collection. The initial acquisitions, enabled by a €199,000 research grant, formalize an inquiry on the intersection of agricultural economies, large-scale urban and rural development schemes, and the infrastructure projects that underpinned imperial expansion. Furthermore, this methodology has forged durable links with the Somali and Ethiopian diasporic communities in Rome; by centering their agency, the museum has transformed colonial artifacts into 'relational objects' that possess contemporary resonance and reclaimed cultural value.

As one enters the museum building situated in the Palace of Sciences, this history is immediately confronted via the installation የካቲት ፲፯ – #Yekatit 12 by artist Jermay Michael Gabriel¹⁹⁰ (Fig. 15). While museum entrances are typically curated as neutral liminal zones designed to stabilize the visitor's transition into an institutional environment, the *Museo delle Opacità* subverts this paradigm. This work, created for the first curatorial chapter started in 2023, has been officially acquired and kept in the entrance space also for the second project started in 2025, enacting an immediate epistemic decentering. The work is a formal reproduction of a stair-shaped monument commissioned in the Ethiopian capital's Addis Ababa by Benito Mussolini and Rodolfo Graziani, at the time Governor-General of Italian Libya. In the original design, each of the 14 steps represented a year of the Fascist era. The title *Yekatit 12* refers to the Ethiopian date (February 19) of the 1937 Addis Ababa massacre of 19000 Ethiopians unleashed by Italian occupation forces, a period of state-sponsored violence following an attempted assassination of Graziani¹⁹¹.

¹⁸⁹ *Museo delle Civiltà, Museo delle Opacità...*, cit.

¹⁹⁰ *Jermay Michael Gabriel (1997)*: He is an Italian-Ethiopian-Eritrean trans-disciplinary artist. His work is mainly based on an experimental effort to resist the permanence of the Italian colonial archive through the subversion of its symbols of power.

¹⁹¹ *Museo delle Civiltà, Museo delle Opacità, Jermay Michael Gabriel, የካቲት ፲፯ – Yekatit 12.* <<https://www.museodelleciviltà.it/oggetti/arti-e-culture-contemporanee/%E1%8B%A8%E1%8A%AB%E1%89%B2%E1%89%B5-%E1%8D%B2%E1%8D%AA-yekatit-12/>> (Last accessed: 22.02.2026).



Fig. 15

Jermay Michael Gabriel, የካቲት ፲፮ – *Yekatit 12*, Installation, *Museo delle Opacità*, MuCiv, Rome¹⁹².

¹⁹² Image source: Personal photograph (January 2026).

By centering this date and the subsequent 1941 nation's liberation from Italian occupation by Emperor Haile Selassie, and, furthermore, with the presence of the Lion of Judah upon the fascist staircase (Fig. 15), Selassie transformed an instrument of Italian imperial propaganda into a site of Ethiopian sovereignty. Gabriel's work, similarly, uses the juxtaposition of original fascist films and historical materialities to disrupt the continuity of the monument¹⁹³. The core methodological choice highlighted is the rejection of unilateral curation, which acknowledges that the 'truth' does not reside solely in its archives but in the subjectivities of those the objects originally belonged to.

Another testament to this realignment present in the 2023 setting was Rossella Biscotti's *Note su Zeret* (2014-2015), a visual diary of 16 photographs documenting the Zeret cave in Ethiopia, the site of a 1939 massacre where Italian forces used mustard gas to slaughter two thousand resistance fighters. Biscotti's work¹⁹⁴ has been guided by Elfresh Tegeni, the daughter of one of only fifteen survivors, and produced after obtaining formal permission from the local community to visit the site and document it¹⁹⁵.

«The artist's work [...] recovers the less easily 'musealised' traces of history by elaborating on the relationship between official propaganda and contemporary oral memory»¹⁹⁶.

Given the relevance of the objects present in the museum deposit and the closeness created with the Ethiopian community in Rome, an entire room was dedicated to Ethiopia colonial holdings, such as the canvas *Baptism of a prince and blessing to the Emperor* by Agegnehu Engida¹⁹⁷ displayed alongside Theo Eshetu¹⁹⁸'s video *The Return of the Axum Obelisk*.

During the Italian occupation of Ethiopia, the canvas was looted from the Parliament building, where it belonged as part of a series, and transported to Italy for exhibition at the

¹⁹³ D. Amodio, *Il fermento dell'arte africana in Italia: il caso dell'Etiopia*, in «Trecani». <<https://www.treccani.it/magazine/atlanter/cultura/il-fermento-dell-arte-africana-in-italia-il-caso-dell-etiofia.htm>> (2024) (Last accessed: 22.02.2026).

¹⁹⁴ *Note su Zeret*: The work draws inspiration from the research conducted by Matteo Dominioni in 2006, the year the massacre was disclosed to the Italian public.

¹⁹⁵ *Museo delle Civiltà, Museo delle Opacità, Rossella Biscotti, Note su Zeret*. <<https://www.museodelleciviltà.it/oggetti/arti-e-culture-contemporanee/note-su-zeret/>> (Last accessed: 22.02.2026).

¹⁹⁶ R. A. Di Lella, *Studies on Colonialism and the Visual Arts. Notes for a Work in Progress*. <<https://quadriennaleroma.org/en/studies-on-colonialism-and-the-visual-arts-notes-for-a-work-in-progress/>> (Last accessed: 22.02.2026).

¹⁹⁷ *Agegnehu Engida (1905-1950)*: He was a pioneer of Ethiopian modernism. His work is celebrated for blending Western abstract, expressionism, and surrealism while maintaining a "distinctively Ethiopian". In 1941, he was appointed Assistant Director of the Ethiopian national Department of Fine Arts.

¹⁹⁸ *Theo Eshetu (1958)*: He is a British-Ethiopian video artist who has worked across documentary, photography, and video installation. His work has been exhibited at major venues including the Venice Biennale, the Smithsonian, and documenta 14.

Museo Coloniale in Rome¹⁹⁹. By placing the extracted artifacts alongside the cinematic documentation of the stele's repatriation, the museum transforms the gallery into a site of restorative negotiation.

As these cases suggest, this curatorial effort does not act as an additive layer to the institution's holdings; rather, it constitutes an intervention designed to address historical revisionism. The methodological shift initiated in the first chapter of *Museo delle Opacità* have managed to navigate this balance, de-legitimizing the critiques previously voiced by the Italian Senate, which have disparaged the 'contemporary turn' promoted by Andrea Viliani.

Indeed, in 2025, MuCiv presented *Museum of Opacities #2: Colonial Agricultures and Architectures*, a display that reveals the mechanisms through which colonial narratives were manipulated for domestic consumption. In this second chapter, the research highlights a selection of photographic documentation from major colonial exhibitions held across Italy. These visual records span from the 1914 International Exhibition of Marine and Maritime Hygiene in Genoa to the 1940 First Triennial Exhibition of Italian Overseas Territories in Naples, including events in Rome, Milan, and Bari. The research is further enriched by documentary funds from the former IsIAO. Integrated into the current display through a partnership with the National Central Library of Rome, these archives illustrate how the Italian imperial project was visually constructed through large-scale public spectacles. Besides this documentation, the exhibition is enriched by a series of artworks, painted by Ethiopian artists, from the former Colonial Museum, presenting scenes of everyday life, such as series on rural labor and depictions of Italian perpetuated colonial authority in Eritrea, as the one shown in Fig. 17²⁰⁰.

Continuing its commitment to artist-led research, MuCiv, once again, additionally promoted a strategy of engagement through research fellowships with various contemporary visual artists.

¹⁹⁹ *Museo delle Civiltà, Museo delle Opacità, Baptism of a prince and blessing to the Emperor*. <<https://www.museodelleciviltà.it/en/oggetti/etiopia-en/baptism-of-a-prince-and-blessing-to-the-emperor/>> (Last accessed: 22.02.2026).

²⁰⁰ *Untitled* (Eritrea): This painting, likely commissioned by Italian authorities, depicts the Governor of Eritrea in the foreground, followed by an Italian officer and a group of *ascari* (colonial soldiers). In keeping with the stylistic traditions of Ethiopian and Eritrean painting, the primary figure is placed at the center of the composition and depicted in a larger scale than the other elements.

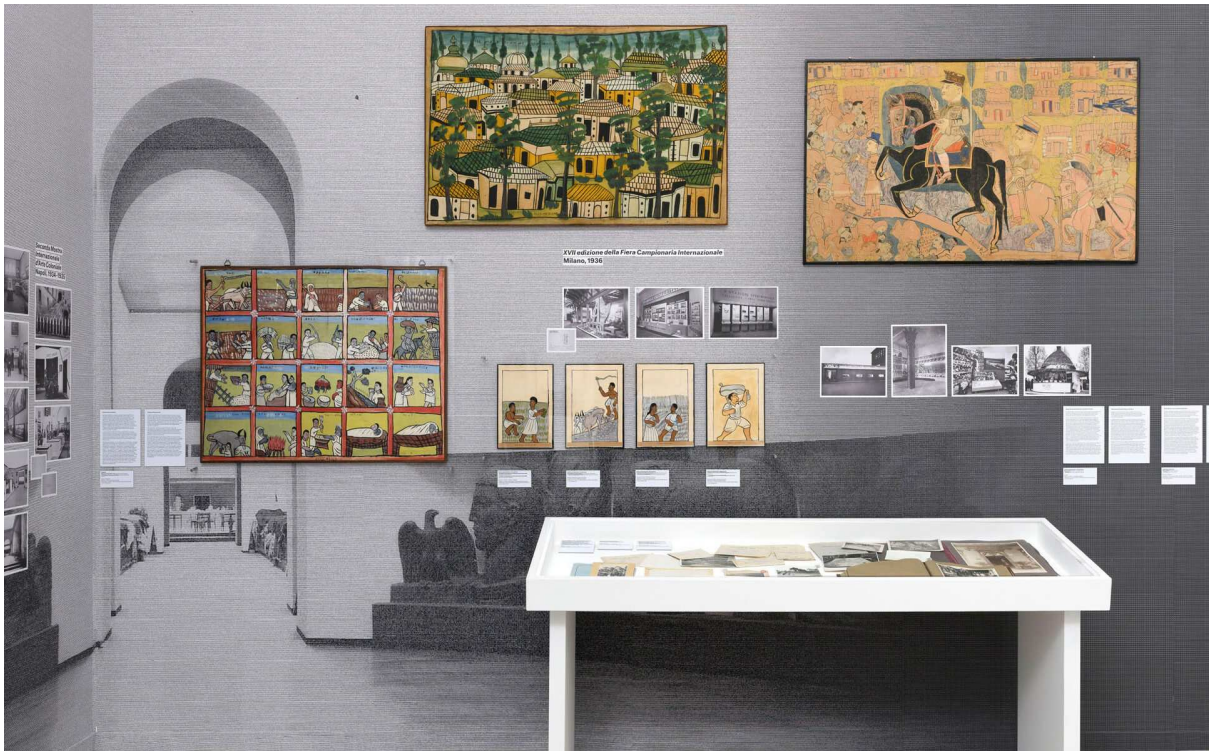


Fig. 16

Installation view of *Museo delle Opacità #2*, MuCiv, Rome²⁰¹.

Fig. 17

Anonymous, *Untitled* (Eritrea, late 19th century), Painting on canvas, MuCiv, Rome²⁰².

²⁰¹ Image source: Photo by Giorgio Benni
<https://www.museodelleciviltà.it/larchiviodelmuseocolonialediroma/> (Last accessed: 22.02.2026).

²⁰² Image source: Personal photograph (January 2026).

Among the artists involved was DAAR, an art collective based in Palestine and Sweden, which created the installation *Ceneri (Ashes)*²⁰³ collocated in the entrance space of the museum. This work builds upon their broader project *Entity of Decolonization*, established in 2022 to confront the legacy of Italian colonialism within national borders. The project centers on the critical reuse of *Borgo Rizza* (renamed Borgo EX), a village built during the Fascist era to house the *Ente di Colonizzazione del Latifondo Siciliano*²⁰⁴. Methodologically, DAAR deconstructed the building's facade, transforming its architectural elements into modular seating designed to host a series of public gatherings with the local community²⁰⁵ (Fig. 18).



Fig. 18

DAAR, Participatory activities and reuse in *Borgo Rizza*, Syracuse, 2022²⁰⁶.

²⁰³ *Ceneri (Ashes)*: The project was awarded the 2023 Golden Lion for Best National Participation at the 18th International Architecture Exhibition: *La Biennale di Venezia*.

²⁰⁴ *Ente di Colonizzazione del Latifondo Siciliano*: It was a public body established by the Fascist regime in 1940 to implement an 'internal colonization', tasked with dismantling the ancient *latifondi* and replacing them with a network of rural hamlets. These settlements were designed to anchor the rural population to the land, applying the administrative and architectural models used in overseas colonies to the territory of Sicily.

²⁰⁵ DAAR – Alessandro Petti and Sandi Hilal, *Ashes*.

<<https://www.museodellecivilta.it/en/events/daar-alessandro-petti-and-sandi-hilal-entity-of-decolonization-ashes/>> (Last accessed: 22.02.2026).

²⁰⁶ Images source: <<https://www.decolonizing.ps/site/>> (Last accessed: 22.02.2026).



Fig. 19

DAAR, *Ceneri (Ashes)*, Installation, *Museo delle Opacità #2*, MuCiv, Rome²⁰⁷.

²⁰⁷ Image source: Personal photograph (January 2026).

Following a prestigious exhibition circuit that included the Berlin Biennale and MuCiv, the installation has served as a platform for 'activating' the latent tensions of colonial-era sites. The project reached its resolution through the incineration of a replica of the installation. This ritual served to transmute the material weight of 'difficult heritage' into a generative potentiality; the resulting ashes were preserved in eighteen urns, functioning as symbolic repositories designed to inform subsequent interventions. In an act of curatorial re-appropriation at the MuCiv, the installation reconfigures two original display cases from the former *Museo Coloniale* into a novel architectural assemblage (Fig. 19). Within this new framework, a video documenting the participatory reuse of *Borgo Rizza* emerges from a symbolic bed of ashes. By juxtaposing the physical remains of the colonial museum with the visual record of its symbolic dissolution, the installation facilitates a synthesis between archival historiography and contemporary decolonial praxis.

The collaboration between the MuCiv and the project's initiators has culminated in the launch of the Prize for the Critical Reuse of Difficult Heritage, an intervention designed to confront the enduring legacy of Italian colonialism. In its first iteration, the prize honors the progressive management of *Borgo EX*. By making the site available for multidisciplinary engagement since 2020, the Municipality has demonstrated a model for the emancipatory transformation of colonial spaces, populating the site with new critical social narratives.

3.3)

EXTERNAL RESPONSE:

MUSEUMS AND 'CONTACT ZONES' IN POST-COLONIAL ITALY

As one exits the museum and re-enters the metaphysical landscape of the EUR, the contrast is striking. While the surrounding neighborhood remains frozen in the monumental aesthetics of Fascist urbanism, the MuCiv operates as a dynamic device that actively deconstructs that very heritage. Inside, the museum functions as a vanguard of international discourse, replacing the district's original logic of separation with a network of interconnected research. Driven by these core values, the institution has attained significant international renown, becoming a benchmark for museums worldwide grappling with the complexities of colonial

heritage. The growing global recognition of MuCiv was solidified by its central role in high-level global discourse, most notably through the direct invitation of the *Museo delle Opacità* curatorial team to London for a seminar dedicated to the comparative analysis of decolonial methodologies (which positioned the Italian case study as a peer to the British Museum in the development of ‘best practices’ for institutional reform), or the selection as one of three international case studies, alongside the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York and the *Musée du Quai Branly* in Paris, at the prestigious “New Architectures, New Museums” symposium hosted by the Fondation Cartier in Paris on January 2026²⁰⁸. The MuCiv’s participation in such a high-level forum confirms that its framework is no longer a peripheral experiment but a globally relevant model for decolonizing national ethnographic collections. Specifically, the pursuit of institutional accessibility and the decision to display collections in a transitional, rather than finalized, state, is one of the most significant practices actuated by MuCiv’s curatorial department. This conceptual framework will be further embodied in the progressive project *Prove di stampa* (Printing Proofs)²⁰⁹, which will incorporate the provisionality inherent in historical revision. Because decolonization is viewed as a ‘work-in-progress’, the museum will partner with international graphic designers and, in consultation with the museum’s own scientific experts, will employ non-static didactic supports designed to be modular and easily modifiable, allowing for the continuous integration of new research, provenance findings, and insights emerging from community dialogues, with the aim of reinforcing the museum’s identity as an active site of intellectual inquiry. While this approach exposes the inherent complexities of the museum’s holdings, it is a deliberate strategy to establish a ‘contact zone’ where diverse social actors, including artists, scholars, and source communities, can engage in active dialogue. As curator Di Lella suggests, by revealing the provisional nature of curatorial labor, the museum invites visitors to participate directly in the critical process of deconstruction. This effort became primarily driven by the ongoing shift within Italian society resulting from contemporary migration. The presence of communities from non-European backgrounds, many of African origin, has radically altered the cultural landscape, demanding a new vision of global relations that museums are now beginning to address. In this renewed social fabric, an understanding of non-European civilizations and their artistic traditions is essential for fostering an equitable,

²⁰⁸ *Fondation Cartier pour l’art contemporain, New architectures, new museums.*

<<https://www.fondationcartier.com/en/programme/events/symposium/new-architectures-new-museums>> (2026) (Last accessed: 22.02.2026).

²⁰⁹ *Museo delle Civiltà, Prove di stampa.*

<<https://www.museodellecivilta.it/riscrivere/prove-di-stampa-goda-budvytyte/>> (Last accessed: 22.02.2026).

democratic, and inclusive multicultural society. Simultaneously, when the complex biographies of museum objects are rigorously investigated and documented, they expose the history of global geopolitical relations²¹⁰. In this regard, MuCiv has demonstrated an active and enriching engagement of diaspora communities, as testified, for example, by the third edition of Somali Culture Week²¹¹, hosted by MuCiv in 2024. Timed to coincide with the anniversary of Somali Independence (July 1, 1960), the event was organized in collaboration with the Italian-Somali cultural association *SomaliyeyToosa Italia*²¹², marking the beginning of a collaborative research project regarding the museum's Somali collections²¹³.

Although the institution has successfully navigated a paradigm shift away from the traditional colonial gaze, this pivot has yet to catalyze a substantive public awakening. While the curatorial language has evolved, the impact remains largely confined to specialist circles, leaving the broader national consciousness largely untouched by the museum's critical inquiries. As emerged in a conversation with curator Rosa Anna Di Lella held during my visit at MuCiv in January 2026, the museum's contemporary framework necessitates a strategic pivot away from the traditional mass-tourist market. Unlike the tourist routes of Rome's historic center, the EUR remains an area that suffers from a perceived geographical and cultural isolation, still struggling to shed its identity as a sterile administrative zone²¹⁴. Furthermore, while the museum has intentionally embraced a strong accessibility transparency effort to facilitate its ethical rebranding, this strategy carries the inherent risk of creating a sense of fragmentation. The continuous process of structural revision and the periodic closure of galleries may inadvertently lead to a visitor experience perceived as 'incomplete', as key thematic areas or collections remain cyclically inaccessible due to re-installations. From an external perspective, this risks being interpreted as a lack of organizational clarity, potentially undermining the institution's broader communicative efficacy.

From a sociopolitical perspective, the matter of visitor engagement at MuCiv can also be interpreted as a symptom of a broader impasse regarding Italy's colonial legacy, as previously stated. The observed institutional evolution operates in tension with a national political

²¹⁰ Pennacini, *Cultural decolonization: even Italy rediscovers...*, cit.

²¹¹ *Somali Culture Week*: The three-day program aimed to promote and celebrate Somali culture in Italy through meetings with writers, researchers, artists, and activists. Discussions covered Somalia, its diaspora, and its traditions, featuring book presentations, collection tours, storytelling, dances and fashion shows.

²¹² A. Mauro, *Cultura somala e memoria del colonialismo italiano*, in «*Il manifesto*». <https://ilmanifesto.it/cultura-somala-e-memoria-del-colonialismo-italiano> (2024) (Last accessed: 22.02.2026).

²¹³ Mauro, *Cultura somala e memoria...*, cit.

²¹⁴ M. Senaldi, *Uno dei più straordinari tra i musei di Roma non ha quasi mai visitatori*, «*Artribune*». <https://www.artribune.com/arti-visive/2026/01/muciv-roma-museo/> (2026) (Last accessed: 22.02.2026).

climate that prioritizes a traditional, identity-focused narrative of Italian history. Following the 2022 elections, the cultural discourse promoted at the governmental level has often emphasized a celebratory view of national heritage, a framework that sits in uneasy contrast with the critical self-reflection required by decolonial imperatives²¹⁵. This friction suggests that the perceived 'crisis' of the MuCiv is not, as some critics in the Senate have argued, a result of an overly radical curatorial agenda. Instead, the lack of public resonance may be a direct consequence of a systemic disconnect in centralized educational policy. Although such ideological trends may not directly disrupt museum operations, they create a discursive environment that fundamentally influences the public's willingness to confront difficult historical truths. When state-led educational frameworks and media narratives do not provide the necessary tools for citizens to confront sensitive themes, such as colonial violence or the complexities of Afro-Italian identity, the museum's efforts risk remaining culturally isolated. Consequently, the institution has intelligently redirected its mission toward a 'in formation target', as defined by Di Lella, prioritizing specific demographic segments such as high school and university students, academic researchers, and localized educational networks. These experimental educational projects are catalyzed by the participation of key cultural mediators, most notably the Somali-Italian author Igiaba Scego and Italian-Moroccan artist and poet Wissal Houbabi, who have facilitated pedagogical interventions both within the museum's setting and in classrooms. By investing on this specialized audience and adopting a philosophy of permanent transition, the MuCiv consciously prioritizes the depth of pedagogical impact over the quantitative metrics of visitor affluence, reflecting the acknowledgement that its decolonial mission requires an audience prepared for the cognitive labor of historical deconstruction.

²¹⁵ J. Imam, *Italy's far right weaponises culture in the interests of nationalism*, in «*The Art Newspaper*». <<https://www.theartnewspaper.com/2022/09/23/italys-far-right-weaponises-culture-in-the-interests-of-nationalism>> (2022) (Last accessed: 22.02.2026).

CONCLUSION

As institutions charged with the preservation and exhibition of cultural heritage, museums serve as primary architects of a population's identity, offering a critical pedagogical space for addressing the history of colonialism and its contemporary repercussions. The discourse surrounding the decolonization of museum institutions offers no simplistic answers; rather, it demands a rigorous engagement with the enduring legacies of colonial violence and structural oppression. As this thesis has argued, museums are not neutral repositories isolated from geopolitical realities, but active participants in the construction of historical narratives.

The recent contemporary turn at the *Museo delle Civiltà* in Rome serves as a critical case study for this institutional evolution. This initiative, by dedicated research fellowships, has facilitated a profound reevaluation of the former Colonial Museum's collection. By inviting contemporary artists and scholars to conduct intensive, archival-based research, the institution has confronted the ethical complexities of Italy's colonial history, a history often characterized by institutional silence.

By centering non-Western voices, the exhibition demonstrates that the Italian national identity has always been shaped by transcultural influences. Rather than framing the colonial past as a closed chapter of Italian history, the museum presents it as a site of borrowing, appropriation, and ongoing dialogue, thereby challenging the idea of homogeneous national heritage. The inclusion of contemporary artworks by members of the African diaspora, now integrated into the national visual canon, serves as material evidence of 'foreign' presence at the heart of the Italian social fabric. Despite the intellectual success of these contact zones, their broader social efficacy is currently limited by a few significant barriers. The institutional neglect highlights a profound friction between the museum and the contemporary political landscape. Without a centralized reform of the national curriculum, the 'contact' risks remaining localized among specialists and activists, failing to reach the broader public. Ultimately, the process of uncovering Italy's problematic past through the lens of the *Museo delle Civiltà* demonstrates that decolonization is an ongoing practice of listening and responding.

The *Museo delle Opacità* project represents a further paradigmatic shift in restorative museology, characterized by the rejection of static preservation in favor of dynamic transparency. Central to this methodology is the principle of accessibility, where the 'work in progress' is intentionally foregrounded, allowing the public to witness the institutional labor

of deconstruction in real time. This spatial strategy transforms the museum into a physical manifestation of the networks and collaborative processes established through its outreach. Given the procedural nature of this institutional evolution, it would be highly productive to revisit this case study following the anticipated completion of the third phase of the *Museo delle Opacità* project in 2026, especially considering that, in the absence of permanent funding and structural mandates, these contact zones risk becoming temporary events rather than permanent shifts in institutional governance.

The most relevant takeout of this theoretical analysis is the fact that contact zones require a continuous labor of mediation, centering the application of memory studies as the main framework for reshaping institutional narratives. Furthermore, to expand the socio-political relevance of this research, future study should investigate whether these pluralistic perspectives can tangibly alter visitor perceptions of Italy's colonial legacy and the lived realities of immigration, in order to determine if the museum's methodological experimentation successfully decentralizes the Italian gaze and fosters a deeper social awareness of its colonial continuities.

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