

Entanglements between Italy and North Africa 1869–1993 (Rome, 25–26 Sept 25)

Bibliotheca Hertziana – Max Planck Institute for Art History, Rome, Sep 25–26, 2025
Deadline: Apr 15, 2025

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Art, Mobility and Border Politics between Italy and North Africa 1869–1993.

This workshop explores the entanglement of artistic production, human mobility and border politics between Italy and North Africa (Maghreb, Sahel and Red Sea areas) from the mid-nineteenth through the twentieth century. Its main objective is to challenge the hegemony of European and North American models in studies of modern Italian art, shedding light on the interconnectedness of culture, history and politics across the Mediterranean. The workshop seeks to interrogate how the circulation of art and artists from Italy to North Africa and vice-versa negotiated, and often challenged, border politics across the age of empires, Cold War divides and ethnolinguistic identities.

While modernity is often understood to coincide with the institutionalization of the nation state and the emergence of various forms of nationalism in the nineteenth century, human mobility across borders proliferated, often as a result of an increasingly global trade as well as the construction of new infrastructure facilitating transnational circulation. Within the Mediterranean, the opening of the Suez Canal (1869) accelerated maritime circulation and propelled human mobility across the sea. The Canal was instrumental for the establishment of Italian “communities” in Egypt throughout the nineteenth century, as well as Italian–Egyptian relations thereafter. This historical juncture encapsulates the interconnectivity of the modern Mediterranean over the following century, or until the establishment of a shared European Union border politics (1993).

From the nineteenth century onwards, Italy cultivated radically different political ambitions across North Africa, often buttressed by an intense program of cultural diplomacy and rhetorical calls to a shared Mediterranean civilization. The colonial occupation of Libya from 1911 to 1943 was justified through rhetorical devices such as the Quarta Sponda(fourth shore) or through conjuring a continuity between the Roman Empire and the fascist regime, and was thus framed as a “re-conquest”. In a similar fashion, during the fascist Ventennio, Italy’s imperial ambitions shaped its diplomatic and cultural relations with North Africa beyond the colonies, especially in Egypt, where Italian schools, hospitals and an Italian-language press were established in the first decades of the twentieth century.

As radical anti-colonial movements ignited across North Africa in the second half of the twentieth century, the post-war establishment in Italy exploited the country’s geographical position in the Mediterranean in the procurement of oil and natural resources from North Africa, especially in the

aftermath of the Algerian war (1954-1962) or following the independence of Libya (1951). This workshop interrogates how these historical events were integrated, negotiated or challenged by art and artists both in Italy and North Africa.

This workshop seeks to go beyond art historical notions such as “influence” in the study of encounters between North and South, this workshop investigates how power imbalances were made visible and challenged in artistic production between Italy and North Africa. Proposed papers may address the following themes:

1. The ways cultural producers responded to Italy's colonial occupation of the territories of present-day Libya both in Italy and in Libya. We also wish to interrogate how anticolonial ideals, in Libya and the wider region alike, reverberated among radical Italian artists and intellectuals in the twentieth century.
2. The role of Italian artists, especially so-called orientalist painters, in the establishment and running of Fine Arts Academies across North Africa, notably Egypt. We are also interested in how these colonial institutions were transformed in the post-colonial period.
3. How the circulation of art and artists followed new trade routes (facilitated by modern infrastructure such as the Suez Canal) in the second half of the nineteenth century and into the twentieth century, especially in Tunisia and Egypt.
4. The networks that North African artists, especially Algerians, Moroccans, and Egyptians, established in Italy from the 1950s onwards, often while studying at the Fine Arts Academy of Rome.
5. The diplomatic role of biennials, travelling exhibitions and Cultural Institutes (e.g. Società Dante Alighieri, the Egyptian Academy in Rome) in facilitating artistic exchanges across borders.

The workshop is organised by the Weddigen department of the Biblioteca Hertziana Max-Planck-Institut for Art History in Rome, and the research unit Decolonising Italian Visual and Material Culture from Nation-building to Now.

We invite researchers to submit proposals for 20-minute papers in English. To apply, please send an abstract of no more than 500 words and a short bio (max. 150 words) with a link/list of publications in a single pdf document to both Giulia Beatrice (giulia.beatrice@biblhertz.it) and Giulia Morale (giulia.morale@biblhertz.it) by April 15, 2025.

We particularly welcome contributions from scholars who are under-represented in academia and those who are affiliated with institutions outside the global North.

The new ecological policy of the Weddigen Department no longer allows flight refunds. Please do contact us prior to the deadline if you would like to discuss travel arrangements by train and accommodation or online participation.

Reference:

CFP: Entanglements between Italy and North Africa 1869–1993 (Rome, 25-26 Sept 25). In: ArtHist.net, Feb 17, 2025 (accessed Jan 10, 2026), <<https://arthist.net/archive/43978>>.