

Material Culture of Italian Colonialism (Rome/ New York, 4-5 Dec 25/ 26 Mar 26)

Deadline: Sep 5, 2025

Carmen Belmonte, Università degli Studi di Padova

Colonial Objects: Material Culture of Italian Colonialism.

Italian museums and private homes hold a substantial number of objects intertwined with the history of colonialism. Their conservation raises questions about their cultural and political significance, alongside debates regarding their provenance and the practices surrounding their restitution. Furthermore, these objects still circulate widely – through auctions, marketplaces, and passed down through family inheritances. Despite this pervasive presence, the growing scholarship on Italian colonialism has not placed material culture at the center of analysis.

Indeed, although Italian colonial visual culture, exhibition history, and museum collections garner increasing scholarly attention, the objects themselves often remain on the margins of inquiry. Furthermore, no specific methodology has been developed for the study of colonial material culture, resulting in a gap in both historical and art historical research.

Bearing traces of their makers and owners, objects act upon bodily experience, affect, and emotions. Our aim is to address the production and circulation of colonial objects to understand their active role in shaping colonial imaginaries, visual culture, and imperial ideologies, and their contribution to the formation of tropes surrounding race, gender, class, and nationhood, both in Italy and abroad. Focusing on the dialectical relationship between the facture of objects and the meanings they produce, we are thus interested in exploring how colonial objects shape memories and ideas, and how their circulation during colonial rule as well as their current preservation yield insights into the negotiations of colonial legacies by colonizers and colonized subjects alike.

With the twofold goal of, on the one hand, interrogating Italian colonial objects, and, on the other, testing material culture theories through case studies that are politically charged and deeply entangled with colonial ideology, we are organizing two international conferences to be held in Rome (Bibliotheca Hertziana, 4-5 December 2025) and in New York (Italian Academy, 26 March 2026).

Rather than merely cataloguing colonial objects, then, these conferences seek to rethink the history of Italian colonialism by focusing on material culture. Therefore, we invite scholars across all disciplines to submit proposals that center on a specific artistic, artisanal, or industrial object, as a means to delve into critical issues concerning Italian colonial history: In what ways did material culture shape the fantasies and experiences of colonialism? How did various constituencies perceive and interact with colonial ideology? What representations of the colonies themselves and of

colonialism as a practice emerge through material culture?

We welcome critical analyses of objects that propose unexpected, alternative, or conflicting narratives of Italian colonialism. Possible case studies can pertain to the fields of art history, military history, economics, industry, education, fashion, design, media, consumption, and tourism, as well as everyday artifacts and utensils.

As the starting point for this investigation, one might consider a range of questions stemming from material culture studies, including (but not limited to) the following:

☒ **Materiality:** What are the visual, material, and formal qualities of the object and their affordances? What responses are evoked by its sensuous qualities? How does it relate to the visual culture of its time? What are its stylistic references? Does it aim to be aesthetically captivating?

☒ **Production:** Who designed and produced these objects, and where? What materials, and techniques or technologies were used to make them? Can we retrace exchanges in imperial and trans-imperial spaces?

☒ **Circulation:** To whom did these objects belong? How and where were they originally displayed (domestic environment, public space, etc.)? Were they part of a collection? What transnational journeys did they undertake to reach their current location?

☒ **Use:** For what purpose were these objects intended? Has it changed over time and in different socio-political contexts, or in relation to the evolving needs and aspirations of their owners?

☒ **Reproduction and remediation:** Were these objects one-of-a-kind or manufactured in large quantities? Did they enter the market, and if so how were they advertised? Were they remediated through different media, and how widely did these circulate in the metropolitan and colonial context?

☒ **Afterlife:** How did the life of the object change after the official end of colonialism? Has it been restored, repurposed, or altered? How accessible has it been since then? How, if at all, is it currently displayed? Has its provenance been verified? Have there been any restitution claims or debates? If so, what impact has the restitution process had on the object and its context?

Please send a proposal of a maximum of 500 words (in Italian or English, accompanied by a short bibliography and at least one image of the object in question) and a short bio to colonialobjects@gmail.com by September 5, 2025. Paper drafts will be pre-circulated two weeks before each conference to foster in-person debates and exchanges.

The organization will partly cover travel and accommodation expenses. For environmental reasons, speakers will be asked to attend the venue closest to them (either Rome or New York). Online participation will also be possible.

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Both conferences originate from a collaboration between the research unit Decolonizing Italian Visual and Material Culture of the Weddigen Department of the Bibliotheca Hertziana - Max Planck Institute for Art History, the Contemporary History section of the German Historical Institute in Rome, and the Italian Academy of Advanced Studies in America, Columbia University, New York, with the generous support of the Ragusa Foundation for the Humanities.

Organizers: Carmen Belmonte (Università degli Studi di Padova/Bibliotheca Hertziana- MPI)
Laura Moure Cecchini (Università degli Studi di Padova)

ArtHist.net

Nicola Camilleri (Maynooth University)

Bianca Gaudenzi (Libera Università di Bolzano/Wolfson College, University of Cambridge)

Locations: Bibliotheca Hertziana – Max Planck Institute for Art History, Rome

December 4-5, 2025

Italian Academy, Columbia University, New York

March 26, 2026

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