

Material Histories of Italian Colonialism (New York/online, 26 Mar 26)

New York, The Italian Academy for Advanced Studies, Columbia University / Online, Mar 26, 2026

Laura Moure Cecchini

Building on the conference held at the Bibliotheca Hertziana in Rome in December 2025, this one-day event will bring together scholars from different disciplines and with a variety of interests to explore the material culture of Italian colonialism. The conference aims to encourage a rethink of Italian colonialism by offering a forum for discussing the historical significance and contemporary legacies of colonial objects.

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. We aim 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.

These two conferences originate from a collaboration among 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; former Fellow at the Italian Academy)

Laura Moure Cecchini (Università degli Studi di Padova)

Nicola Camilleri (Maynooth University; former Fellow at the Italian Academy)

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

To join us in the Italian Academy:
<https://www.eventbrite.com/e/material-histories-of-italian-colonialism-tickets-1981435347463?utm-campaign=social&utm-content=attendeeshare&utm-medium=discovery&utm-term=listing&utm-source=cp&aff=ebdsshcopyurl>

To attend remotely on Zoom:
<https://columbiauniversity.zoom.us/j/93014447485?pwd=nQGWt98X6PkkJzmTwVbkH9rRSCS4.1> (Meeting ID: 930 1444 7485; Passcode: 903818)

PROGRAM

09:30 - 10:00 Registration and welcome coffee

10:00 - 10:30 Welcoming remarks

Barbara Faedda (Italian Academy, Columbia University)

Carmen Belmonte (University of Padua/ Bibliotheca Hertziana - Max Planck Institute for Art History, former fellow of the Italian Academy) and Nicola Camilleri (Maynooth University/ University Roma Tre, former fellow of the Italian Academy)

Petra Terhoeven (Deutsches Historisches Institut, Rome) and Tristan Weddigen (Bibliotheca Hertziana - Max Planck Institute for Art History)

10:45 - 12:15 Panel I: Colonial Objects on the Move

Chair: Nicola Camilleri (Maynooth University/ University Roma Tre, former fellow of the Italian Academy)

Lauren Bartone (University of California, Berkeley), Cotton Dreams: From New Orleans to Palermo and Back Again

Angelo Caglioti (Barnard College), Portable Knowledge: Travel Guidebooks, Scientific Instruments, and the Production of the Imperialist Self

12:15 - 13:15 Lunch break

13:15 - 15:30 Panel II: Consuming the Empire

Chair: Bianca Gaudenzi (University of Florence/ Wolfson College, University of Cambridge)

Diana Garvin (University of Oregon), Pitching Coffee to Sell the War

Andrew Denning (University of Kansas), Fiat Africana: Motor Vehicles, the Colonial Imaginary, and Materializing Empire

Ignacio Galán (Barnard College), 'Nomad' Equipment: Furnishing the Empire

15:30 - 16:00 Coffee break

16:00 - 17:30 Panel III: Afterlives of Colonial Objects

Chair: Carmen Belmonte (University of Padua/ Bibliotheca Hertziana - Max Planck Institute for Art History, former fellow of the Italian Academy)

Brian McLaren (University of Washington), The Culture of Italian Colonial Printed Material: Between Document and Index

Shauna LaTosky (University of Northern British Columbia), The Lure of the Labret in (Post)colonial Imaginaries

Final discussion

Moderator: Laura Moure Cecchini (University of Padua)

Reference:

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