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Gerardo de Simone, Emanuele Pellegrini - predella@predella.it

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Recensione a Carmen Belmonte, *Arte e colonialismo in Italia: oggetti, immagini, migrazioni (1882-1906)*, Collana del Kunsthistorisches Institut in Florenz Max-Planck-Institut XXII, Venezia, Marsilio, 2021.

The monograph by Carmen Belmonte contributes to the historiographical debate on the role of images and visual culture during Italian colonialism, which has grown considerably in recent years. Originating from the author's specialization and doctoral thesis, enriched by years of research at prestigious international art-historical institutions, the monograph succeeds in holding together the historical approach to colonialism with attention to the materiality of objects, as well as tackling decolonial issues while providing an in-depth investigation of colonial visual culture and its articulation.

The volume, richly and finely illustrated with an apparatus of more than one hundred images, does not set out to be a catalogue of works that can be enclosed under the label of "colonial art" but instead aims to provide a transmedial analysis that looks at the circulation of images and objects between exhibition events, public spaces, collections, illustrated prints and paintings to examine the structuring of colonial myths and imaginaries. The chronological choice (1882-1906) privileges the first phase of colonialism in liberal Italy, going from the acquisition of the Bay of Assab to the years before the revamping of the colonial enterprise with the Lybian War in 1911. This period has been little analysed in comparison to the much broader scholarly interest in the fascist empire; therefore, the book sheds light on an important phase of Italian colonialism in strict connection to national identity-making. The book, written in Italian and focused on the Italian case, does not limit itself to the national debate and benefits from the interaction and dialogue with international scholarship on the topic of colonial visibility and materiality.

After an introduction that sets the methodological framing and provides clearly and concisely a general literature review, the text is divided into four chapters

that allow the reader to grasp different topics. The first section is especially dedicated to the visual strategies adopted to communicate the Battle of Dogali and the construction of an iconography able to convey a sense of heroism while dealing with the first traumatic defeat experienced by the Italian troops against the Ethiopian army in 1887. The chapter looks at different media and objects, with specific attention to the circulation of images in the illustrated press, publications, and ephemeral production, such as popular leaflets. The author pays particular attention to the technical and editorial context of image production, which circulated mainly in the form of engravings, touching also upon the connection with the photographic medium. Moreover, it offers a reflection on the first production of colonial art as well as the creation of colonial collections, which began developing around private initiatives or exhibitions.

The second chapter is still centred upon the same battle. However, instead of the visual flows analysed above, it is dedicated to two monumental objects: the *Monumento ai caduti di Dogali* and the painting *La battaglia di Dogali*, both to be installed within the city of Rome. It deals, therefore, with the state-driven attempt to elaborate an official memory around this event and to construct a convincing propaganda to be crystallised and displayed in the public space. Despite the apparent fixity of the cases, the author manages to show here, too, the processes of remediation and re-signification of the artworks, their movement in different spaces, their juxtaposition with other objects and monuments, and their connection to collective rituals such as ceremonies and exhibitions. To do so, the chapter moves the chronological frame beyond 1906, including the changes that occurred to the obelisk after the fascist colonial campaign in Ethiopia, when the statue of the *Leone di Giuda* symbol of the occupied country was moved from Addis Abeba to be relocated at the base of the monument, as a sign of national revenge. Moving further, it analyses the postcolonial debate around the issue of restitution, providing also an example of contemporary artistic intervention that further highlights the moving and migrant biography of every object. The chapter also considers the huge painting *La battaglia di Dogali*, commissioned to Michele Cammarano by the Ministry of Public Education for the *Galleria Nazionale* and completed only in 1896, right after the Adowa battle, where the Italian army was once again defeated. The author reconstructs the aesthetic and political negotiations in the making of the canvas, looking at preparatory production such as sketches, personal accounts like the artist's memoir of his stay in Massaua, as well as the documents produced by cultural heritage professionals and politicians that show the changing policy of visibility and invisibility to which the painting was subjected.

The third chapter is entirely centred on a specific yet diversified case, that of the *Esposizione Nazionale* in Palermo (1891-1892). Reconstructing the spatial organisation and the overarching narrative beyond the event, the chapter analyses different pavilions and exhibition spaces where the colonial issue resurfaces. The chapter looks in particular at the section of *Belle Arti* – where artworks about the battle of Dogali were shown, the *Villaggio Eritreo* – a case of ethnological exposition with Eritrean people performing traditional tasks for the Italian bourgeoisie public –, and the *Mostra Etnografica Siciliana* – that showcased the collection of Sicilian traditional objects curated by Giuseppe Pitrè. Through this case, the author shows that the public reception of the event tended to associate colonial and southern Italian populations, intersecting concepts of primitive and popular and corroborating a narrative that considered the South as another Africa.

The last chapter discusses the use of images in connection to the anticolonial stances. In particular, Belmonte offers a detailed reconstruction of Giovanni Fattori's production around the iconography of the abandoned soldier, adopted by the painter to depict in a realistic and anti-rhetorical way a critique of the Italian colonial policy after the defeat of Adowa in 1896. This section has the merit of intersecting the historical research on Italian anticolonialism with the analysis of the treatment, construction, and circulation of images of colonial dissent. By intertwining written sources by anarchist thinkers, illustrations circulating in the press, and Fattori's sketches and canvases, it is possible to unveil not only a widespread anti-militarist sentiment but also solidarity with the Eritrean people and condemnation of the enlistment of *ascari* into the Italian troops. This final chapter makes it possible to disclose nuances within artistic production dedicated to colonial events and spaces, distinguishing through iconographical and archival research the not-always straightforward lines between dissent and consent.

Finally, the brief conclusion hints at the importance of considering the continuity between the first phase of the colonial campaign and the fascist revival of the imperial narrative during the Ethiopian War, looking at these two historical moments in connection and assessing relationships in terms of rhetorical and visual construction.

Although some chapters dig into the analysis of artists – especially Cammarano and Fattori – and the book is solidly positioned within the art-historical discipline, it breaks away from an art-historical paradigm focused primarily on the discussion of artistic production, intersecting it with a research into diffused visual culture that circulated through different media, focusing on the migration, movements, reception, and re-interpretation of images and objects as well as their social and cultural biographies.

In a phase of renewed attention for colonial history and a growing sensibility toward decolonisation, Belmonte's volume is a precious resource, offering a methodological aid when discussing concepts such as colonial imagery, gaze, and visual culture, which risk becoming too broad categories for a wide set of sources created through different media dispositives. The case-based analysis offers an opportunity to bring to the surface recurrent iconographies as well as variations and modifications, elaborating on transmedial dynamics in detail and disclosing how images were used not only to build national and colonial rhetoric but also to contrast it.