

UN CASTO (?) GIUSEPPE NELL'IMBARAZZO

LA RANA N. 17.



AFRICA — Vieni, vieni Crispino fra le mie braccia; t'aspetta amore. CRISPI (*da sé*) — Venire e non venire, andare e non andare... Ecco il problema! Però, mettersi in certi impegni a quest'età... AFRICA — Ti chiamano vecchio impenitente e non risolvì mai! Eppure un meridionale dovrebbe sentire il fuoco Africano... CRISPI — Taci, dieci volte Sirena... Solo, sarei saltato d'addosso... ma in questo caso bisogna che siano contenti 400 e tanti onorevoli colleghi!... Ah sono troppi, troppi davvero!...

1 "Un casto (?) Giuseppe nell'imbarazzo",  
in: *La Rana*, 17 (27 April 1888), pp. 2f.

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# STAGING COLONIALISM IN THE ‘OTHER’ ITALY ART AND ETHNOGRAPHY AT PALERMO’S NATIONAL EXHIBITION (1891/92)

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*Carmen Belmonte*

In 1888 the satirical journal *La Rana* published a caricature entitled “Un casto (?) Giuseppe nell’imbarazzo”<sup>1</sup> (Fig. 1). It represents a seductive African woman lying on a bed, only partially covered with a white sheet; in an allusive gesture, she stretches toward an embarrassed old man wearing a nightshirt. In the background, a red curtain unveils an endless column of African warriors, ready to attack. One of them, hidden behind a shield, crouches near the bed, in the foreground, representing a threatening counterpart to the seductive woman. In order to lead the viewer toward the metaphorical level of the image, the author labeled the two main figures with inscriptions, identifying the old man as Francesco Crispi, prime minister of Italy at the time, and the woman as a per-

sonification of Africa, characterized by a tiger pelt and an amphora.

The colored illustration, openly critical of the government, summarizes the complex dynamics of Italian colonial policy. Italy had occupied Eritrean territories, starting with the Massawa harbor, since 1885. A few years later, however, a thousand warriors led by the Ethiopian general Ras Alula decisively blocked the Italian expansion toward the Ethiopian hinterlands. Thus, Italy endured a heavy defeat in the Battle of Dogali, Eritrea, on 26 January 1887.<sup>2</sup> Despite the defeat and the loss of around five hundred Italian soldiers, which gave rise to anti-colonialist movements, in the following years the government led by Crispi reinforced the Italian colonial

<sup>1</sup> “A chaste (?), embarrassed Joseph.” (All translations by the author.)

<sup>2</sup> For the first Italian colonial settlement in East Africa in nineteenth century see Roberto Battaglia, *La prima guerra d’Africa*, Turin 1958; Angelo Del Boca, *Gli italiani in Africa Orientale*, I–IV, I: *Dall’Unità alla marcia su Roma*, Milan

<sup>2</sup>1999 (1976); Nicola Labanca, *In marcia verso Adua*, Turin 1993; Giuseppe Finaldi, *Italian National Identity in the Scramble for Africa: Italy’s African Wars in the Era of Nation-Building, 1870–1900*, Bern/New York 2009. For visual representations of the Battle of Dogali in different media and the manipulation

presence in East Africa with additional funding and troops.<sup>3</sup>

Although the image argues against Italian colonial policy, it represents all the African figures, including the woman, according to pervasive racist visual stereotypes. Furthermore, the cartoon addresses the reader through a close interplay between the image and the text placed in the lower edge of the frame. There, a fictional erotic dialogue takes place between the Sicilian Crispi and the charming woman embodying the African continent, represented according to the iconography of Joseph and Potiphar's wife.<sup>4</sup> Specifically, the woman's statement "ti chiamano vecchio impenitente e non risolti mai! Eppure un meridionale dovrebbe sentire il fuoco Africano..." reveals a common stereotype, widespread in the final decades of the nineteenth century, asserting close analogies and similarities between the African populaces and people coming from Southern Italy.

This article focuses on the particular triangulation developed during the years of the 'scramble for Africa'<sup>5</sup> among the Italian nation, Sicily, and the African colony. Only recently politically unified and indeed divided by strong cultural differences and multiple dialects, Ita-

ly was strongly 'imagined' by the government, the establishment, and the bourgeoisie, all of whom committed in different ways to the process of nation building.<sup>6</sup> I will investigate the dynamics of this triangulation through the analysis of the national exhibition held in Palermo, Sicily, in 1891/92 – the first ever organized in a Southern Italian city. My study will focus on some pivotal points of the exhibition: the *Belle Arti* section, the *Mostra Eritrea*, which included a human exhibition of Abyssinian people as well as one of the first systematic displays of collections of objects and raw materials coming from the East African colony, and the *Mostra Etnografica Siciliana*, organized by Giuseppe Pitrè.

Italian colonial propaganda materializes within the exhibition path. Further, through the heterogeneous materials put on display there emerges an internal Orientalism,<sup>7</sup> drawing comparison and analogies between the humblest social classes of Sicily and the colonized African population.

Conceptualizing the exhibition as "meta-media", as a specific means of communication incorporating other communicative technologies,<sup>8</sup> I will give particular attention to the visibility of the event, to the image network created inside and outside the exhibition.

and transformation of the defeat into a heroic episode, see Carmen Belmonte, *La battaglia di Dogali: iconografia di una sconfitta*, tesi di specializzazione in Art history, University of Pisa 2011.

<sup>3</sup> On the figure of Francesco Crispi and his role within the first Italian colonial exploitation see Christopher Duggan, *Francesco Crispi, 1818–1901: From Nation to Nationalism*, Oxford/New York 2002.

<sup>4</sup> "AFRICA – Vieni, vieni Crispino tra le mie braccia: t'aspetta amore. CRISPI (*da sé*) – Venire e non venire, andare e non andare... Ecco il problema! Però, mettersi in certi impegni a quest'età... AFRICA – Ti chiamano vecchio impenitente e non risolti mai! Eppure un meridionale dovrebbe sentire il fuoco Africano... CRISPI – Taci, dieci volte Sirena... Solo, sarei saltato d'addosso!... ma in questo caso bisogna che siano contenti 400 e tanti onorevoli colleghi!... Ah sono troppi, troppi davvero!..." ("AFRICA – Come, come here Crispino into my arms: love is waiting for you. CRISPI [*to himself*] – To come, or to not come... That is the question! But, how to deal with such a task at my age... AFRICA – They call you impenitent old man and you never resolve! And yet a southerner should feel the African fire... CRISPI – Keep quiet, ten time Siren... Alone, I would throw myself right now!... but in this case it is necessary to make happy more than 400 honorable colleagues [of the Parliament]... There are too many, really too many!...")

<sup>5</sup> The phrase describes the more than twenty-year period, between the last decades of the nineteenth century and the beginning of the twentieth, when European powers explored, partitioned, and colonized most of the African continent.

<sup>6</sup> I refer to Benedict Anderson's classical study and to his concept of "imagined communities" in relation to nationalisms: Benedict R. O'G. Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*, London 32006 (1983).

<sup>7</sup> On the issue of internal Orientalism in Italy, see in particular *Italy's "Southern Question": Orientalism in One Country*, ed. by Jane Schneider, Oxford/New York 1998. The question has been broadly examined by the literature on Meridionalism; here I indicate just some of the publications on the topic: John Dickie, *Darkest Italy: The Nation and Stereotypes of the Mezzogiorno, 1860–1900*, New York 1999; John Agnew, "Italy's Island Other: Sicily's History in the Modern Italian Body Politic", in: *Emergences*, X (2000), pp. 301–311; Nelson Moe, *The View from Vesuvius: Italian Culture and the Southern Question*, Berkeley 2002; Aliza S. Wong, *Race and the Nation in Liberal Italy, 1861–1911: Meridionalism, Empire, and Diaspora*, New York 2006.

<sup>8</sup> See Alexander C. T. Geppert, *Fleeting Cities: Imperial Expositions in Fin-de-Siècle Europe*, Basingstoke 2010, pp. 1–15.

Therefore, the focus will be on selected objects and works of art that were exhibited, on the display strategies used and on their dissemination through the main illustrated journals documenting the exhibition.

The event produced a wide range of publications, including several guides describing the exhibition path and the city of Palermo, but the official illustrated journal documenting the event, *Palermo e l'Esposizione nazionale del 1891–92: cronaca illustrata*,<sup>9</sup> was produced by an important publisher based in Milan, the Fratelli Treves, which during the same years was publishing *L'Illustrazione Italiana*, the main national illustrated journal. Also Sonzogno, another publisher based in Milan, printed a low-cost journal entitled *L'Esposizione nazionale illustrata di Palermo 1891–92*.<sup>10</sup> Through a critical reading of these journals, both published periodically in several instalments, it is possible to analyze the visual and cultural dynamics of the event and its reception in Italy.

The idea of a national exhibition organized in Palermo had originated just a few years before and was developed by an enterprising local élite consisting of intellectuals and businessmen. Using their international connections and their acquaintances among the high circles of Italian politics they obtained the support of some ministers, and in particular they gained the favor of the Sicilian head of government Francesco Crispi.<sup>11</sup> On 15 November 1891 the exhibition was inaugurated by King Umberto I and Antonio Strabba, Marquess of Rudinì, who had replaced Crispi in the position of prime minister just a few months before.

The exhibition was held in a peripheral area of the city, along the Viale della Libertà, where the city was expanding beyond the walls. The architect Giuseppe Basile had planned a monumental architectonic complex with several ephemeral buildings constructed in a continual succession alongside the border of the area (Fig. 2).<sup>12</sup> This guaranteed visitors an entirely covered exhibition path, while the space in the middle of the architectural complex hosted a huge garden.<sup>13</sup> Following the eclectic tendencies of those years, the architectural project adopted a repertoire drawn from the study of relevant patterns and models of Sicilian historical architecture, and from coeval building projects realized as part of international exhibitions.<sup>14</sup> Thus, the portico at the main entrance was inspired by the south side of Palermo's cathedral realized in the fifteenth century. The dome in the *Salone delle feste* recalled Santa Sofia in Istanbul, and the *muqarnas* pendentives quoted an element typical of Islamic architecture, also present in several Norman buildings in Sicily. The aim was to evoke Sicily's historical connection with other Mediterranean cultures and to provide testimony for the early presence of Islamic culture on the island, still evident in its heritage. It was not by chance that a model of the *muqarnas* ceiling of the central nave of the Palatine Chapel was on display within the National Exhibition, in the *Galleria della Sicilia monumentale*. The *Belle Arti* palace, an autonomous building separated from the complex, was instead inspired by the edifice of the

<sup>9</sup> *Palermo e l'Esposizione nazionale del 1891–92: cronaca illustrata*, Milan 1892.

<sup>10</sup> *L'Esposizione nazionale illustrata di Palermo 1891–92*, Milan 1892. On the publications dedicated to the exhibition see Lilli Dalle Nogare, "L'Esposizione di Palermo nella stampa milanese: le pubblicazioni di Treves e Sonzogno", in: *Dall'artigianato all'industria: l'Esposizione Nazionale di Palermo del 1891–1892*, ed. by Massimo Ganci/Maria Giuffrè, Palermo 1994, pp. 117–125.

<sup>11</sup> On the promotion, the concept, and the organization of the National Exhibition of Palermo see Marianonietta Picone Petrusa, "1891–92, Palermo, Esposizione Nazionale", in: *Le grandi esposizioni in Italia 1861–1911: la competizione culturale con l'Europa e la ricerca dello stile nazionale*, ed. by eadem/Maria Rosaria Pessolano/Ada Bianco, Naples 1988, pp. 96–99, and Giulia Fanara, "Il villaggio eritreo all'Esposizione Nazionale di Palermo 1891–1892:

narrazioni dell'alterità e nuova identità nazionale nell'Italia coloniale umbertina", in: *Archivio Storico Siciliano*, XXXI (2005), 4, pp. 33–93.

<sup>12</sup> Fabrizio Agnello/Mariangela Licari, "La ricostruzione della città perduta: l'Esposizione Nazionale di Palermo (1891–1892)", in: *La ricostruzione congetturale dell'architettura: storia, metodi, esperienze applicative*, ed. by Nunzio Marsiglia, Palermo 2013, pp. 145–164: 145.

<sup>13</sup> Maria Cristina Buscioni, *Esposizioni e "stile nazionale" (1861–1925): il linguaggio dell'architettura nei padiglioni italiani delle grandi kermesses nazionali ed internazionali*, Florence 1990, pp. 122f.

<sup>14</sup> For the formal analysis of the architectonical structure of the exhibition pavilions and the analogies and quotations of Sicilian architecture, see Agnello/Licari (note 12), pp. 147f.

Centennial International Exhibition held in Philadelphia in 1876.<sup>15</sup>

According to the architectural plan the exhibition was organized into twelve sections earmarked for the hosting of seven thousand exhibitors. The pavilions proposed a systematization of knowledge and of modern technological progress starting from raw materials, proceeding with their transformations through human intervention – showing machines and technical instruments –, gradually ascending to the *arti liberali*, and finally reaching the contemporary artistic production in the *Belle Arti* section. Therefore, science, exploration, agriculture, transport, modern industry, cultural heritage, and the contemporary arts were all presented within the frame of a modern liberal state, protected by its army and police forces, and by social security institutions, each represented in the exhibition.<sup>16</sup>

The national exhibition of Palermo was strongly supported by Sicilian aristocracy and entrepreneurs. It aimed to promote Sicily, to encourage the discovery of its cultural heritage, its natural landscape, and its Mediterranean climate, and to show the development of Sicilian companies and factories. For the Italian nation it constituted the occasion to demonstrate the success achieved during the thirty years after the unification, in Sicily and in the South in general, in suppressing the phenomenon of *brigantaggio*. The intent was to show that the Sicilian insurrections of 1866,<sup>17</sup> as well as the minor ones that followed, were events of the past, and to reposition Sicily within the Italian national history, emphasizing the role played by the region in the Risorgimento. Hence, the *Galleria della Sicilia Monumentale*<sup>18</sup> (Fig. 3) presented a compendium of the most representative monuments testifying to the archaeological and medieval heritage of the island:

architectural elements from Selinunte, reproductions of arches and portals, in addition to oil and watercolor representations of the main churches of Sicily. On the other hand, the close-by *Galleria dei Ricordi del Risorgimento* (Fig. 4) highlighted the Sicilian contribution to the process of national unity.

In addition, the event coincided with a crucial positive moment for the nation's colonial policy, which just one year before, in 1890, had finally obtained the formal establishment of the colony of Eritrea. Therefore the national exhibition was for Italy an occasion to fashion itself as a colonizing nation and to present the newly-acquired colony. In this way Italy tried to redeem itself after the defeat of Dogali and to obtain new credibility at an international level.

The pavilion of the Società Geografica Italiana offered wide photographic documentation of Italian exploration in Africa as well as objects and maps of the territories hitherto explored. The pavilion hosted also a display of travel manuscripts of the most distinguished travelers and modern explorers, among which particular prominence was given to the Italians, in order to testify that:

[...] l'Italia non è rimasta indietro alle altre nazioni nella magnifica gara di attività e di energie che si propone di strappare gli ultimi veli d'Iside, di diffondere a sprazzi la luce della civiltà ove la barbarie predomina, e colla barbarie trionfa la schiavitù e non di rado l'antropofagia. Basta dare uno sguardo alla grande carta murale della parete al centro del padiglione per convincersi dell'opera della Società Geografica Italiana. Su codesta carta, che a nostro giudizio ha un valore morale altissimo, son tracciati gl'itinerari che da venti anni e più i nostri viaggiatori africani han seguito.<sup>19</sup>

<sup>15</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 148.

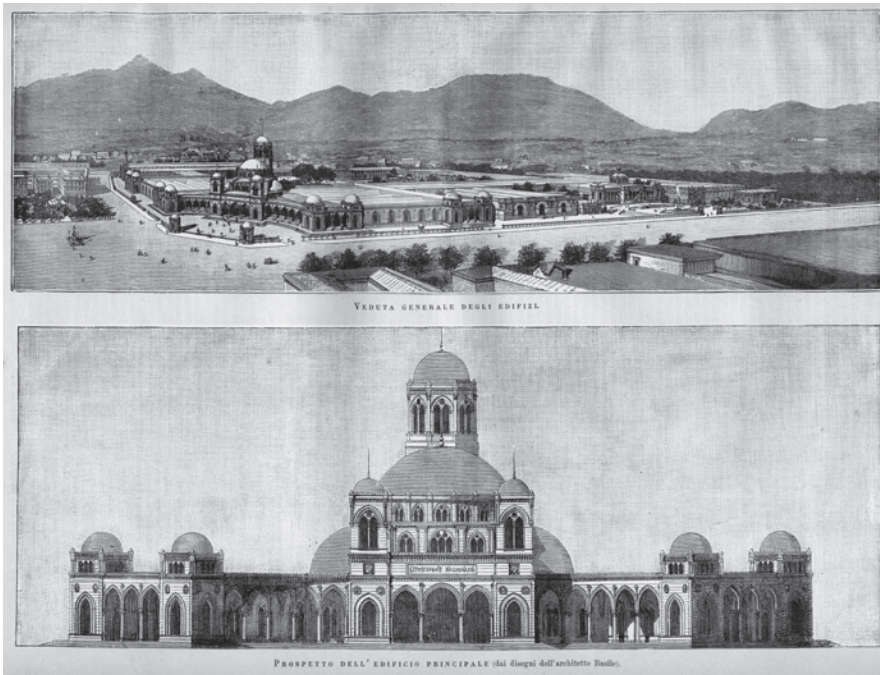
<sup>16</sup> Giuseppe Maria Finaldi, *Italian National Identity in the Scramble for Africa: Italy's African Wars in the Era of Nation-Building, 1870–1900*, Bern/New York 2009, p. 227.

<sup>17</sup> For this topic see Lucy Riall, *Sicily and the Unification of Italy: Liberal Policy*

and Local Power, 1859–1866, Oxford 1998, and *eadem*, *Under the Volcano: Revolution in a Sicilian Town*, Oxford 2013.

<sup>18</sup> “La Sicilia monumentale all'esposizione”, in: *Palermo e l'Esposizione nazionale* (note 9), II, p. 83.

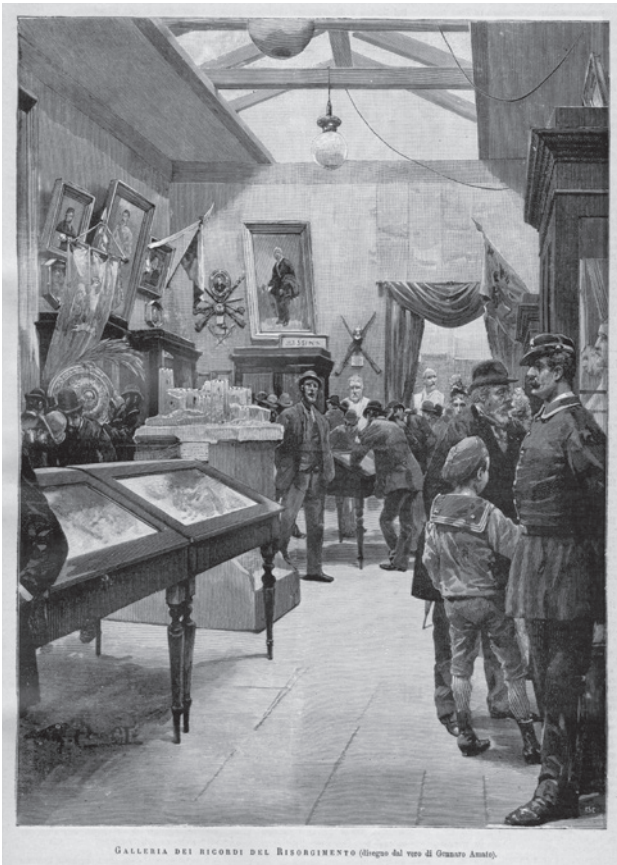
<sup>19</sup> Giuseppe Pipitone-Federico, “Il padiglione della Società Geografica Ita-



2 "Veduta generale degli edifici" and "Prospetto dell'edificio principale", in: *Palermo e l'Esposizione nazionale del 1891-92: cronaca illustrata*, Milan 1892, 2, p. 13



3 "La Galleria della Sicilia Monumentale", in: *Palermo e l'Esposizione nazionale del 1891-92: cronaca illustrata*, Milan 1892, 15, cover



GALLERIA DEI RICORDI DEL RISORGIMENTO (disegno dal vero di Gennaro Amato).

4 "Galleria dei Ricordi del Risorgimento (disegno dal vero di Gennaro Amato)", in: *Palermo e l'Esposizione nazionale del 1891-92: cronaca illustrata*, Milan 1892, 14, p. 109

liana", in: *Palermo e l'Esposizione nazionale* (note 9), 23, p. 183. ("Compared to the other nations, Italy was not left behind in the magnificent competition of powers whose purpose was to tear the last veils of Isis and spread the light of civilization where barbarity reigns, and barbarity is what let slavery and often also anthropophagy triumph. It is enough to glance at the large wall map in the middle of the pavilion to convince one about the work of the Italian Geographical Society. This map, of a very high moral value in our opinion, marks out the routes that our travelers to Africa have been following for more than twenty years.")

Therefore, outlining its presence in Africa as a civilizing mission, Italy exhibited the efforts undertaken in order to improve the knowledge of the African continent and demonstrated its determination to continue to play an important role in the European colonial competition.

### The *Belle Arti*

It was through the display of contemporary artworks in the *Belle Arti* palace that the exhibition dealt with the delicate matter of the heavy defeat endured in Dogali four years before. In the centerpiece of one of the salons of the *Galleria della Scultura* was the monumental work *A Dogali*, realized by Benedetto Civiletti from Palermo (Fig. 5).<sup>20</sup> The plaster group, constituted by fifteen figures in the round, represented a handful of soldiers led by the colonel Tommaso De Cristoforis,<sup>21</sup> riding a horse. Around the figure of the colonel, who had died on the battlefield and immediately became a colonial hero, there was a pyramidal composition consisting of soldiers' bodies either lying on the ground, crouching, or in assault position. While the Italian soldiers are closely characterized by diversified and expressive physiognomies, the enemies are totally excluded from the visual narration and their role in the battle is just recalled by the spears hammered on the ground and in the soldiers' uniforms. The artist's intention was to offer a realistic narrative of the event, recreating the tragic movement generated by the soldier's actions and gestures, and presenting their disheveled bodies and their creased and worn uniforms. In addition, in order to affirm

<sup>20</sup> See Carol Bradley, s.v. Civiletti, Benedetto, in: *Dizionario biografico degli Italiani*, XXVI, Rome 1982, pp. 94–97 (with previous bibliography); Laura Bica, s.v. Benedetto Civiletti, in: *Dizionario degli artisti siciliani*, III: *Scultura*, Palermo 1994, n.p.; Antonina Greco, "Artisti ed opere, Benedetto Civiletti", in: *I gessi della Civica galleria d'arte moderna: scultori dell'Ottocento e del Novecento in Sicilia*, ed. by eadem, Palermo 1999, pp. 31–46.

<sup>21</sup> He was one of the leaders in the suppression of the Sicilian revolt in 1866. See Lauro Rossi, s.v. De Cristoforis, Tommaso, in: *Dizionario biografico degli Italiani*, XXXIII, Rome 1987, pp. 598–600: 598.



5 Benedetto Civiletti, *A Dogali*, 1887-1891. Palermo, Civica Galleria d'Arte Moderna, Gipsoteca di Palazzo Ziino; historical photo from *Palermo e l'Esposizione nazionale del 1891-92: cronaca illustrata*, Milan 1892, 12, cover

his documentary intent and his fidelity to historical data, he gave the work precise space-time coordinates, by engraving on the base the inscription A DOGALI / ORE 11 E 45 A.M. DEL 26 GEN. / 1887. However, the composition conformed to the images of the battle conceived and broadly spread by the illustrated press in order to justify the Italian defeat and to transform

the embarrassing military event into a heroic episode of Italian history.<sup>22</sup> The rhetoric of heroism is patent in the representation of the protagonist of the event, the colonel De Cristoforis. In fact Civiletti adopts the traditional representation of the leader on horseback, which in recent times had already been used for Napoleon, Garibaldi, and by the Sicilian artist himself

<sup>22</sup> On the relation between the iconography of the sculpture group and the popular images of the battle published in the illustrated press see Carmen Belmonte, "Synchronies of Violence: Italian Colonialism and Marinetti's

Depiction of Africa in *Mafarka the Futurist*", in: *Vision in Motion: Streams of Sensation and Configurations of Time*, ed. by Michael F. Zimmermann, Berlin/Zurich 2016, pp. 165-182.



for the equestrian monument of King Vittorio Emanuele II in Palermo.<sup>23</sup>

A close study of the plaster group is not possible, since in 1964 it was sectioned for a planned bronze casting (which was never realized); only some fragments remain, currently exhibited in the Civica Galleria d'Arte Moderna of Palazzo Ziino in Palermo.<sup>24</sup> Its study is therefore primarily founded on illustrations and photographs that appeared in contemporary journals.<sup>25</sup> Thanks to these we know that in its first display within the exhibition it occupied a central position that gave great prominence to the group and especially encouraged the visitors to walk around the sculpture, in order to have a closer view of all the imposing figures of the soldiers (Fig. 6). In this way the public could partake in the particular tragic moment preceding the defeat, during which, according to official narrations, the Italian troops, although outnumbered, would have fought strenuously with the few means still available to them. Thus, despite the realistic representation of the single figures, the dynamic composition is carefully constructed to present the group of soldiers as an army that would not surrender to the defeat and which, though besieged, ideally rises up the heroic figure of its leader, who is bravely brandishing his sword.

Following the political and social tensions aroused by the episode of Dogali, the subject was particularly challenging for artists. However, the epic tone adopted by Civiletti and the dramatic interpretation con-

formed to the colonial rhetoric of the period, which was essentially the *Leitmotiv* of the National Exhibition. Since the inauguration, the sculpture group was the real protagonist of the *Belle Arti* section, as recorded by Raffaello Barbiera in his review:

In generale il bello di questa mostra non è nuovo; e il nuovo non è bello... salvo, ripeto, le nobili eccezioni. Fra queste, mettiamo il Dogali del Civiletti, ch'è la più osservata opera d'arte.

[...] Uno degli eroi è rassomigliantissimo: è il prode ufficiale Grifo. Le altre fisionomie, studiate dal vero, sono parimente piene d'espressione. È soprattutto resa con grande verità la schiera dei morti. [...] Sua Maestà il Re, nell'osservarli, diventò pallido; la Regina trattenne a stento le lagrime, e chiese allo scultore: Come avete potuto rendere così il fatto di Dogali?

— ... Maestà, rispose Civiletti, appena lessi i telegrammi di Dogali, ne rimasi profondamente impressionato, e fin da allora immaginai questo gruppo, che mi costò due anni e mezzo di lavoro.

Le figure dei morti sono le meglio modellate; ma tutto il gruppo, drammatico da ogni parte si guardi, fa pensare che questo è il più espressivo ricordo che finora si abbia di quella battaglia titanica [...].<sup>26</sup>

The work was strongly appreciated by the reviewer, as well as by King Umberto I and Queen Margherita, for its emotional agency and above all for its

<sup>23</sup> The monument was inaugurated in Piazza Giulio Cesare opposite to the railway station in 1887.

<sup>24</sup> Greco (note 20), p. 37.

<sup>25</sup> See Raffaella Messina, "Ottocento siciliano dimenticato: tre scultori palermitani. Benedetto Civiletti, Vincenzo Ragusa e Mario Rutelli", in: *Dialoghi di storia dell'arte*, 7 (1998), pp. 112–129: 121f.; Antonella Purpura, "La Gipotecca", in: *I gessi* (note 20), pp. 11–18: 14f.; Antonina Greco, "A Dogali", *ibidem*, p. 150, no. 10; Stefano Grandesso, "Scultura palermitana come scultura nazionale: una collezione per l'Ottocento e il Novecento", in: *Galleria d'Arte Moderna di Palermo: catalogo delle opere*, ed. by Fernando Mazzocca/Gioacchino Barbera/Antonella Purpura, Cinisello Balsamo 2007, pp. 50–59: 52.

<sup>26</sup> Raffaello Barbiera, "Uno sguardo generale alle Belle Arti", in: *Palermo e l'Esposizione nazionale* (note 9), 39, pp. 306f.: 306. ("Overall the beautiful

things of this exhibition are not new; and the new ones are not beautiful... besides, I repeat, the notable exceptions. Among them, Dogali by Civiletti is the most admired work. [...] One of the heroes is highly resembling: it is the brave official Grifo. The other figures, drawn from reality, are equally very expressive. Especially the dead are represented with great truth. [...] When looking at them, His Majesty the King paled. The Queen struggled to contain her tears and asked the sculptor: 'How did you manage to represent the event of Dogali in such a way?' — '... Majesty, Civiletti answered, as soon as I read the telegrams on Dogali, I remained deeply impressed and since then I imagined this group, which took me two and a half years of work.' The shapes of the dead are the best molded ones, and the whole group, dramatic from every angle, suggests that this is the most expressive memory of this titanic battle we have until now [...].")



6 "Belle Arti. - Galleria della Scultura", in: *L'Esposizione nazionale illustrata di Palermo 1891-92*, Milan 1892, 25, p. 196

power to recall the sacrifice of the soldiers and offer a sensitive memory of the battle. Although the art critic Ugo Fleres criticized the composition,<sup>27</sup> the heroic interpretation of the event guaranteed its great success, and it was celebrated as a masterpiece.

Another representation of the battle appeared to the public of the exhibition in the painting section, where the *Battaglia di Dogali* by Cesare Biseo was put

on display (Fig. 7).<sup>28</sup> The painter, active in Rome and involved in the artistic movement *In arte libertas*, had extensively traveled in northern Africa, collaborating, inter alia, as an illustrator for the books *Marocco* and *Costantinopoli* by Edmondo De Amicis, together with Stefano Ussi.<sup>29</sup> In addition, thanks to his artistic production characterized by African subjects, he had gained a reputation as an Orientalist painter.

<sup>27</sup> "[...] *Il massacro di Dogali* [...] terribile ma inefficace per la composizione che veramente non è scultoria; appena potremmo idearla espressa in bassorilievo, meglio e con tutta naturalezza in pittura" ("*The massacre of Dogali* [...], dramatic but ineffectual because of the composition, which is really not sculptural; we just could imagine it realized as a bas-relief, better in painting with all its naturalness"); Ugo Fleres, "Scultori italiani contemporanei", in: *Il secolo XIX nella vita e nella cultura dei popoli*, Milan 1899, pp. 161f.

<sup>28</sup> On the artist see Margherita Abbruzzese, s.v. Biseo, Cesare, in: *Dizionario biografico degli Italiani*, X, Rome 1968, pp. 675f. (with previous bibliography); Anna Gramiccia, in: *Da Canova a De Carolis: acquisizioni e restauri dalle collezioni dell'Ottocento della Galleria Nazionale d'Arte Moderna 1975-1978*, exh. cat. Rome 1978, pp. 49-64, nos. 39-93; Maria Antonella Fusco, "Avventure artistiche

mediterranee, per pittori meridionali", in: *Gli orientalisti italiani: cento anni di esotismo (1830-1940)*, exh. cat. Turin 1998/99, ed. by Rossana Bossaglia, Venice 1998, pp. 29-38; Alessandra Imbellone, "Cesare Biseo: dalla decorazione all'orientalismo e la campagna romana", in: *Incanti e scoperte nella pittura dell'Ottocento italiano*, ed. by Emanuela Angiuli/Anna Villari, exh. cat. Rome 2011, Cinisello Balsamo 2011, pp. 88-91.

<sup>29</sup> Edmondo De Amicis, *Marocco*, Milan 1877; *idem*, *Costantinopoli*, Milan 1877/78. For Treves, who had published both books, Biseo also realized several illustrations that were reproduced in xylography and appeared in *L'Illustrazione Italiana* (Marina Sorbello, s.v. Cesare Biseo, in: *Dipinti, sculture e grafica delle collezioni del Museo Africano: catalogo generale*, ed. by Mariastella Margozzi, Rome 2005, pp. 274f.: 275).

For the representation of the battle in the large horizontal format of his canvas, Biseo avoided the depiction of the conflict with the traditional pattern of counterposed troops on the battleground, catching instead the moment before the attack. Biseo built the composition of the picture by adopting the enemy's viewpoint: starting from the left edge in the foreground, a column of Abyssinian warriors advances through the folds of the land until the rising ground in the distance. Caught from behind and represented as a single fluid mass, barely recognizable by their white and red garments, the African soldiers are defined by a seemingly infinite number of lances. They surround the Italian troops standing on a hill through an undulating, snake-like movement. In this regard, the painter demonstrates a documentary intent, as the circular movement of the Ethiopian army is not fictional, but rather corresponds to the military strategies adopted by the Abyssinian troops during the Battle of Dogali, according to the witnesses' account and the official report of the battle.<sup>30</sup>

The large size of the canvas, the low viewpoint, the diagonal column of Abyssinian warriors, which orients the gaze toward the central portion of the painting, the handful of Italian soldiers positioned on the hill, theatrically illuminated by a beam of light, contribute to the creation of a proto-cinematographic painting: in the suspension of that moment anticipating the massacre, it engages the public in the visual narration, placing the viewer in the queue behind the African troops.

Despite the originality of the composition, some reviewers of the exhibition criticized the lack of importance given to the Italian soldiers as well as Biseo's artistic skills. Raffaello Barbiera, who had positively

commented upon the sculptural group *A Dogali*, in his review of the *Belle Arti* section observed:

Si comprende l'idea del pittore, idea che non manca di effetto e di poesia; riconosco le difficoltà enormi affrontate dall'artista egregio; le mosse degli africani e il loro slancio rivelano l'abile mano di un provetto; ma l'insieme lascia a desiderare. Quel povero De Cristoforis, che pare una figurina di Sèvres, non desta il sentimento grandioso, epico, che il suo nome e il suo eroismo risveglia in noi al puro e semplice ricordo del glorioso fatto di Dogali [...].<sup>31</sup>

Contrary to Civiletti, Biseo had abstained from celebrating the last actions of the Italian soldiers, who are visible only as tiny figures in the distance. However, despite the absence of popular visual topoi of the battle, Biseo's interpretation of the event perfectly complied with the requirements of colonial propaganda, by presenting the battle as an unpredictable trap and by highlighting the superior numbers and the alleged ferocity of the Abyssinian army. Hence, the adoption of the enemy's viewpoint in constructing the composition does not reveal his opposition to Italian colonial policy. Rather, the painting was in line with the official narratives of the battle, as reported by an anonymous reviewer of the exhibition:

Anzi per quanto ciò possa parer contraddittorio, il quadro del Biseo, che è assai debole nella fattura, debolissimo, quasi oleografico nelle figure del primo piano, è la espressione più indovinata tra quante se ne sono tentate attorno al tragico episodio africano. Il pittore ha benissimo impaginato una composizione, nella quale di primo tratto ci commuove l'esiguità e compostezza del manipolo nostro, sacro alla morte già sì prossima, e

an idea that doesn't lack in effect and poetry; I acknowledge the enormous difficulties that he had to face; the gestures of the Africans as well as their impetus show the skilled hand of an expert. The whole work leaves a lot to be desired though. The poor De Cristoforis, who looks like a Sèvres figurine, does not evoke the epic feeling that his name and his bravery inspires in us when recalling the glorious event of Dogali [...]."

<sup>30</sup> The study of Abyssinian gestures, anatomies, and physiognomies is demonstrated by seven preparatory drawings owned by the Istituto Italiano per l'Africa e l'Oriente and at the moment stored in the Galleria Nazionale in Rome. See *Dipinti, sculture e grafica delle collezioni del Museo Africano* (note 29), pp. 83f.

<sup>31</sup> Barbiera (note 26), p. 307. ("The idea of the painter is comprehensible,



7 Cesare Biseo, *La Battaglia di Dogali*, 1887-1891. Palermo, Palazzo dei Normanni

la moltitudine e la briachezza, quasi, dei nemici che si spingono, si precipitano alla orrenda vittoria.<sup>32</sup>

Thus, the plaster group *A Dogali* and the painting by Cesare Biseo fell within the margins of Italian colonial propaganda and, even despite the critiques of their artistic quality, they received the most important prizes of the *Belle Arti* section. Civiletti's sculpture was awarded with the gold medal, the *Battaglia di Dogali* by Biseo gained the silver one. It has been demonstrated that, in the last decades of the nineteenth century, the illustrated press played a strategic role in conditioning the taste of the public and assuring the success of specific works in the exhibitions.<sup>33</sup> These dynamics were noted and described by the painter and art critic Francesco Netti:

<sup>32</sup> "Dogali di Cesare Biseo di Roma", in: *L'Esposizione nazionale illustrata di Palermo 1891-92* (note 10), 22, p. 170 (the painting is reproduced on p. 172). ("On the contrary, although this might sound contradictory, Biseo's painting, which is very weak in its execution, extremely weak, almost oleographic in its foreground figures, still represents, among many attempts, the most perfect expression related to the tragic African episode. The painter has very well organized a composition in which, at a first glimpse, we are touched by the scarce number and the composure of our handful, doomed to a close

Agli occhi della maggior parte dei visitatori, anche intelligenti di arte, sfuggono facilmente quadri eccellenti, che sono da loro ritrovati sol quando la voce, che si propaga, ne ha nominato gli autori, e i giornali ne hanno stampato lo elogio. Allora si va all'esposizione per vedere alcuni quadri soltanto, con un'opinione fatta. Ed è forse per risparmiare al pubblico la pena di farsene una, che è invalso l'uso nei giornali di pubblicare, prima dell'apertura dell'Esposizione, quali saranno i quadri migliori [...].<sup>34</sup>

In the National Exhibition of Palermo as well, the success of both works was deeply affected by the strategies of the illustrated journals of the exhibition. Civiletti's group was the subject of articles in both journals, and in each case was also illustrated on the cover of the

death, as well as by the multitude and quasi drunkenness of the enemies, who push each other and rush toward the horrendous victory.")

<sup>33</sup> On the relationship between national artistic exhibitions and the illustrated press see Michael F. Zimmermann, *Industrialisierung der Phantasie: Der Aufbau des modernen Italien und das Mediensystem der Künste: 1875-1900*, Munich/Berlin 2006, pp. 12f.

<sup>34</sup> Francesco Netti, *Per l'arte italiana*, Trani 1895, p. 101 ("In the eyes of most of the visitors, even the experts, excellent paintings can be easily missed.

installment;<sup>35</sup> Biseo's painting was discussed and reproduced in an article in Sonzogno's *L'Esposizione nazionale illustrata di Palermo 1891–92*.<sup>36</sup> Therefore, as part of the National Exhibition these journals had a crucial role, especially influencing the public in the reception of the exhibition. Despite the absence of any official agreement with the government, they were actively involved in the spread of colonial propaganda.

Civiletti and Biseo had freely and independently chosen to deal with the delicate and topical subject of Dogali, without any demand from the government or the political establishment. Nevertheless it could be useful to frame their works in the logics of the “quadro d'esposizione”, according to the definition given by Francesco Netti, in order to see how they fit within a wider trend of works of art that were created with the intent to excel in the exhibition dynamics and “aprirsi un varco in mezzo alla folla e trionfare facendo chiasso”.<sup>37</sup> In fact, beginning with the *Esposizione Internazionale di Belle Arti* held in Rome in 1883, Italian artists had become aware that the adoption of a monumental format would improve their chances of the government purchasing of their works.<sup>38</sup> In Palermo, a topical and emotionally charged military subject, strictly related to Italian national history, would have assured the favor of the establishment and the attention of the media. Therefore, even in the absence of any official commission or explicit political pressure, as part of the complex dynamics among the lobbies involved in the promotion of the exhibition and their multiple economic and political interests, both the works dedicated to the Battle of Dogali, together

with their remediated images, autonomously became a powerful instrument of colonial propaganda.

### The *Mostra Eritrea*

In the large garden set in the central space of the exhibition complex, outside the several pavilions in which Italy celebrated progress and modernity, the visitors encountered the *Mostra Eritrea*, whose major attraction was a human exhibition of Africans coming from the colony and its surroundings. They were put on display within a fictional village delimited by a fence, provided with exemplars of East African vegetation and a number of *tukul*, the traditional Abyssinian building. The aim was to offer a cross-section of the East African landscape and setting, together with a snapshot of everyday life in the colony.

An illustration by Gennaro Amato<sup>39</sup> published on the Treves journal as drawn from nature presents in a visual sequence the main topoi of the fictional village of the *Mostra Eritrea* (Fig. 8). In the upper strip, the first frame shows the human display by sketching some Abyssinian silhouettes in front of a *tukul*; the second one constitutes the only image of the collection of African objects and materials included in the Eritrean exhibition, described as a disordered ensemble of African objects, especially weapons, whereas the last one outlines the area where some Italian military shelters used in the colony were erected, around which some Abyssinian boys are spending their time. The lower strip suggests instead an overview of the village and provides a visual narration, filtered through the Italian colonial gaze, of its fictional social life. The encounter between coloniz-

These are found only when the voice, which spreads around, has mentioned the authors' names and newspapers have printed their praise. Then we go to the exhibition to see only a few paintings with a formed opinion. It is perhaps in order to spare the public the burden of forming their own [opinion] that it has become widespread practice for the journals to publish which paintings will be the best just before the exhibition opening [...].”

<sup>35</sup> “A Dogali: gruppo di Benedetto Civiletti”, in: *Palermo e l'Esposizione nazionale* (note 9), 12, p. 94 and cover illustration; “Dogali, gruppo dello scultore Benedetto Civiletti”, in: *L'Esposizione nazionale illustrata di Palermo* (note 10), 2, p. 10 and cover illustration.

<sup>36</sup> “Dogali di Cesare Biseo a Roma”, in: *L'Esposizione nazionale illustrata di Palermo* (note 10), 22, p. 170 (reproduction on p. 172).

<sup>37</sup> Netti (note 34), pp. 103f. (“to push one's way through the crowd and triumph by making clamour.”)

<sup>38</sup> Maria Mimmita Lamberti, “1870–1925: i mutamenti del mercato e le ricerche degli artisti”, in: *Storia dell'arte italiana*, ed. by Federico Zeri, II.iii: *Il Novecento*, Turin 1982, pp. 3–172: 43, note 10.

<sup>39</sup> Gennaro Amato (Naples, 1857–1947) worked as an illustrator for Italian publishers such as Treves, Sonzogno, Bemporad and collaborated with the French journal *L'Illustration* and the British *The Illustrated London News* and *The*



8 "Nella Mostra Eritrea (disegno dal vero di Gennaro Amato)", in: *Palermo e l'Esposizione nazionale del 1891-92: cronaca illustrata*, Milan 1892, 15, p. 117

ers and colonized staged in Palermo is presented to the reader of the journal through the paternalistic gesture of the elegant bourgeois couple approaching two African children in the foreground. Through the representation of this alleged pacific encounter Italy sanctioned the beginning of its 'civilizing mission' in Africa.<sup>40</sup>

Through the exhibition a portion of the Abyssinian population, whose warriors had become famous for their cruelty after the Battle of Dogali, was classified

and 'tamed' within a fence, at public disposal.<sup>41</sup> Following the model of the living human exhibition already common among other European colonizing nations,<sup>42</sup> Italy for the first time attempted to assimilate the Abyssinian population within the national urban context.

Therefore, as documented by the journal of the exhibition, the group of Abyssinians put on display included individuals representative of different professions, expertise, and social status: a priest, a painter,

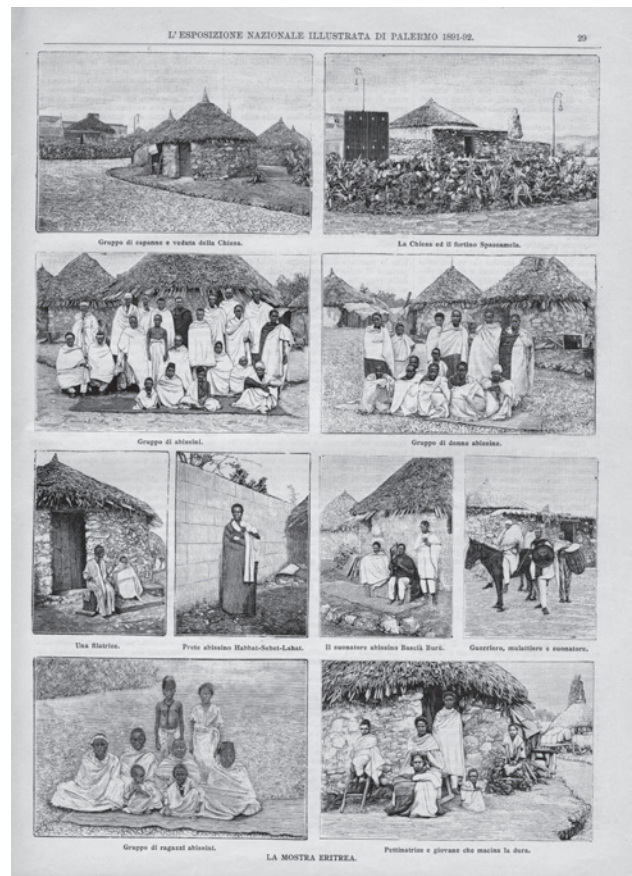
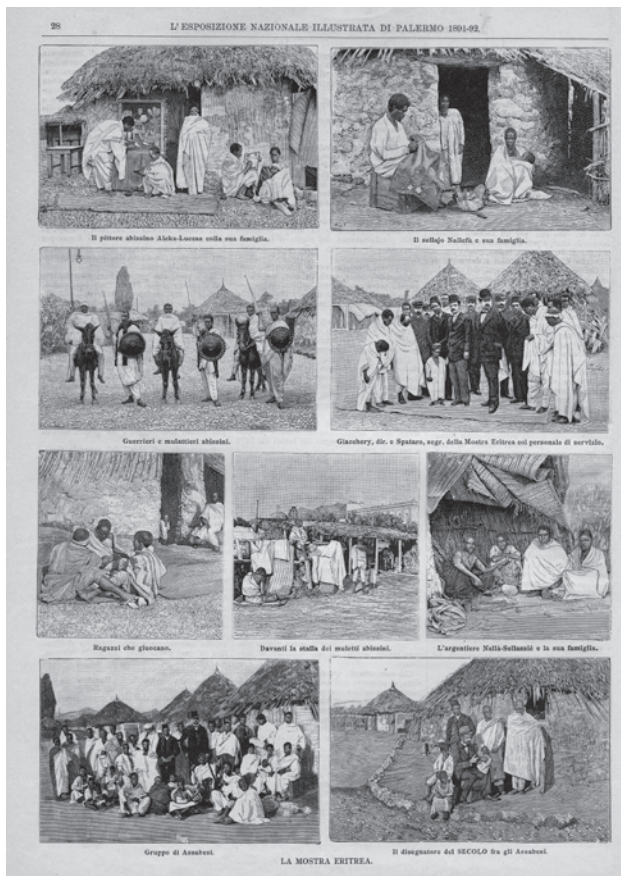
*Graphic*. He also illustrated several books by Gabriele D'Annunzio, Edmondo De Amicis, and above all Emilio Salgari. See Paola Pallottino, s.v. D'Amato (Amato), Gennaro, in: *Dizionario biografico degli Italiani*, XXXII, Rome 1986, pp. 293f.

<sup>40</sup> For a postcolonial critic of Italian colonialism see *A Place in the Sun: Africa in Italian Colonial Culture from Post-Unification to the Present*, ed. by Patrizia Palumbo, Berkeley, Calif., 2003; *Italian Colonialism*, ed. by Ruth Ben-Ghiat/Mia

Fuller, New York 2005; *Italian Colonialism: Legacy and Memory*, ed. by Jacqueline Andall/Derek Duncan, Oxford/New York 2005.

<sup>41</sup> On exhibition of humans in Italy see Guido Abbattista, *Umanità in mostra: esposizioni etniche e invenzioni esotiche in Italia (1880-1940)*, Trieste 2013, and specifically on the Palermo exhibition pp. 193-199.

<sup>42</sup> On the transnational practice of human display see *Moving Bodies, Dis-*



9a, b "La Mostra Eritrea", in: *L'Esposizione nazionale illustrata di Palermo 1891-92*, Milan 1892 4, pp. 28f.

musicians, artisans, and some warriors, accompanied by their relatives (Figs. 9a, 9b). They consisted of sixteen familiar groups, ten of them Christians and the others Muslims. The official journals of the exhibition published a detailed catalogue of the personal profiles of the heads of the families, recording their names and place of birth, their skills and crafts, and the presence of their wives, sons or servants. There were also references to their artifacts on display. In fact, as part of this colonial exhibition an assortment of raw materi-

als and crafted objects from Eritrea was arranged in a pavilion called Caffè Arabo (Fig. 10) with the aim to encourage commercial interests in the newly-acquired colony.

If the National Exhibition in Palermo had been promoted by a local élite, the idea to include also a *Mostra Eritrea* was raised by a group of politicians, journalists, and military officers – mostly based in Rome – who were considered ‘specialists’ of Africa, including the politician Leopoldo Franchetti.<sup>43</sup> The

*playing Nations: National Cultures, Race and Gender in World Expositions: Nineteenth to Twenty-first Century*, ed. by Guido Abbattista, Trieste 2014.

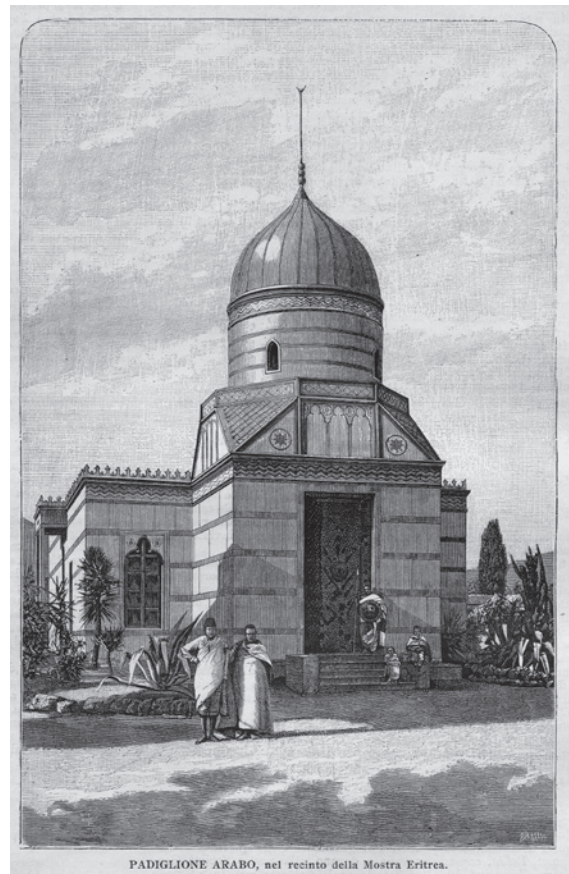
<sup>43</sup> Franchetti had been appointed to carry out an analysis of Sicilian society, together with Sidney Sonnino (Leopoldo Franchetti/Sidney Sonnino,

*La Sicilia nel 1876*, Florence 1877). See Stephen C. Bruner, “Leopoldo Franchetti and Italian Settlement in Eritrea: Emigration, Welfare Colonialism and the Southern Question”, in: *European History Quarterly*, XXXIX (2009), I, pp. 71–94.

collections as well had been assembled by politicians, officers, or businessmen, who for different reasons had experienced life in East Africa: the Franchetti collection gathered textiles traded in Massawa; the lawyer and journalist Luigi Mercatelli, correspondent from the colony for the *Corriere di Napoli*, had collected agricultural products from Eritrea; the geologist Luigi Baldacci, who had been in Eritrea since 1890 verifying its mineral resources, presented a collection of rocks. These collections were exhibited together with materials selected by the Minister of War and a choice of East African timbers.<sup>44</sup> In addition, an army officer, the infantry lieutenant Marcello Gallareto, had collected various Abyssinian artifacts – manuscripts, jewelry, textiles, silver artifacts, musical instruments, weapons, and everyday objects – and wrote the related section of the catalogue,<sup>45</sup> indicating the original name of each object, its translation, and adding some short notes regarding its use in Eritrea. Despite the wish to offer to visitors a collection representative of Abyssinian culture and its artistic skills, no anthropologist or ethnologist had been involved, neither in the selection and display of the materials nor in the writing of the catalogue. In the late nineteenth century, these disciplines were not yet involved in the praxis of Italian colonial policy and their study and expertise were confined to academic research.<sup>46</sup>

The lack of photographic documentation of the Caffè Arabo display does not allow for an analysis of single objects and display strategies; however, the catalogue of the *Mostra Eritrea* (Fig. 11), published when the exhibition had been already opened, introduced the Gallareto collection with these words:

<sup>44</sup> In the catalogue, the sections dedicated to the various collections are entitled as follows: “1. Collezione Franchetti: campionario di tessuti; confezioni ed oggetti diversi di completamento vestiario, in commercio a Massaua”; “2. Raccolta esposta dalla Dogana di Massaua”; “3. Campionario dei prodotti agrari della colonia africana raccolti dall’avvocato Mercatelli”; “4. Raccolta di legnami indigeni”; “5. Collezione di Rocce della Colonia Eritrea, raccolta dall’Ingegnere Baldacci”; “6. Collezione Gallareto: vestiario, arredi e piccoli mobili”; “7. Collezione del Ministero della Guerra” (*Guida della Mostra*



10 “Padiglione Arabo, nel recinto della Mostra Eritrea”, in: *L’Esposizione nazionale illustrata di Palermo 1891-92*, Milan 1892, 17, p. 132

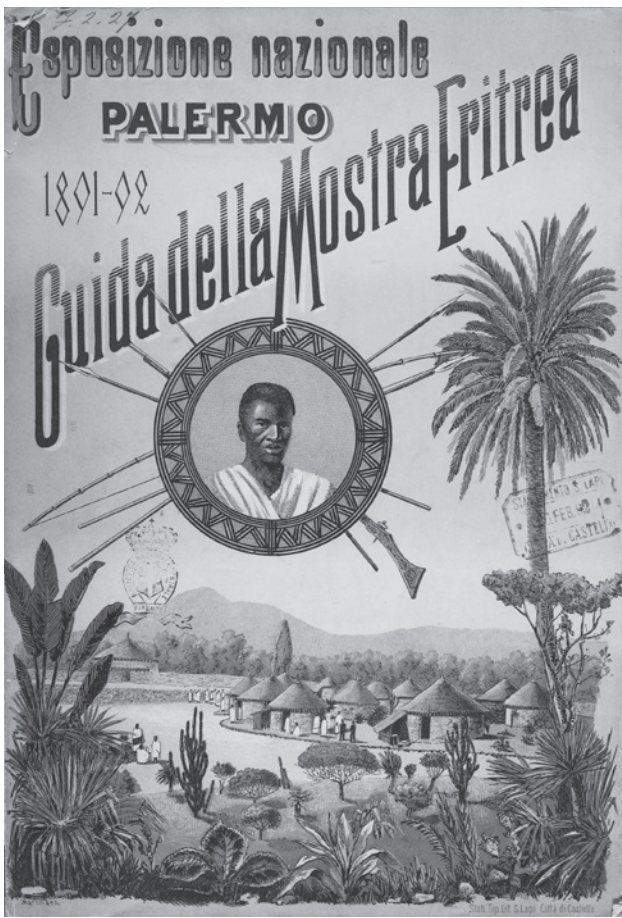
La collezione Gallareto, infine, la quale attira più delle altre la curiosità del pubblico, perché maggiormente colpisce i sensi, oltre ad avere un interesse speciale per lo studio degli usi e costumi degli indigeni della Colonia, può anche presentare – a mio modo di vedere – un nuovo cespide di importazione in Italia, dove, oltre alle svariatis-

*Eritrea: cataloghi delle collezioni esposte*, exh. cat. Palermo 1891/92, ed. by Giovanni Di Fede, Città di Castello 1892).

<sup>45</sup> Marcello Gallareto, “Oggetti figuranti nella Mostra Eritrea presso l’Esposizione Nazionale di Palermo, e acquistati dal Tenente Gallareto Marcello per conto del Comitato Centrale dell’Esposizione suddetta”, *ibidem*, pp. 123–128.

<sup>46</sup> Barbara Sòrgoni, “Italian Anthropology and the Africans: The Early Colonial Period”, in: *A Place in the Sun* (note 40), pp. 61–80: 64.





11 Cover of the *Guida della Mostra Eritrea: cataloghi delle collezioni esposte*, Città di Castello 1892

<sup>47</sup> Giovanni Di Fede, “La Mostra Eritrea”, in: *Guida della Mostra Eritrea* (note 44), pp. V–XVI: XVI (italics in the original text). (“The Gallareto collection which attracts the curiosity of the public more than the others, being the one that mostly touches the senses, besides having a special interest for the study of traditions and habits of the indigenes from the colony, might also present, in my opinion, a new import asset in Italy, where apart from the numerous chinoiseries, all the objects having the flavor of the Orient are very much in demand in the salons.”)

<sup>48</sup> On the ambiguous meaning of the term *orientale* see the classical study by Edward W. Said, *Orientalism*, New York 1978. On the practice of collecting ethnographical objects the work of James Clifford remains fundamental:

sime *Chinoiseries*, sono molto ricercati per i salotti eleganti, tutti gli oggetti che *sentano di orientale*.<sup>47</sup>

This passage makes clear that, although the potential value of the collection as materials for an ethnographical analysis is recognized, it was mainly displayed to satisfy the interest for exotic objects, which had a wide appeal in Italy at the time. Yet there was no real interest in the peculiarities of the Abyssinian artifacts; they were assimilated in an imaginary collection of objects “che *sentano di orientale*”.<sup>48</sup>

At any rate, for the first time African ethnographic objects and works of art – such as the paintings of Halekà Lucas,<sup>49</sup> presented as the favorite artist of Johannes IV, emperor of Ethiopia – were displayed in an Italian National Exhibition with a specific catalogue, obtaining great attention in the media. Through the objects of the Gallareto collection, Abyssinia’s traditions and habits became more accessible and attractive to the public of the exhibition. At the same time, by highlighting Abyssinian artistic skills the collection demonstrated the relevance of the colony of Eritrea, whose population was considered as one of the more advanced civilizations on the African continent.<sup>50</sup>

### Palermo and the *Mostra Etnografica Siciliana*

Through the visual and textual materials published in the exhibition journals, comparisons and analogies emerge between Sicilian popular culture and the Abyssinian population. This comparison was not unprecedented, yet it was strengthened on the occasion of this

James Clifford, *The Predicament of Culture: Twentieth-Century Ethnography, Literature, and Art*, Cambridge, Mass., 1988.

<sup>49</sup> On Halekà Lucas see Finaldi (note 16), pp. 236–239, and Carmen Belmonte, *Arte e colonialismo in Italia tra Otto e Novecento: dinamiche politiche e strategie visive nella prima guerra d’Africa*, Ph.D. Diss., University of Udine, 2017, pp. 182–190.

<sup>50</sup> Giuseppe Sergi’s theory, later known as Hamitic hypothesis, affirmed that Mediterranean and Hamitic populations, which included the Abyssinians, had a common origin. In this way the populations of the Horn of Africa were distinguished from those of ‘inferior’ black Africa (Giuseppe Sergi, *Africa: antropologia della stirpe camitica. Specie eurafriicana*, Turin 1897). See Sòrgoni (note 46), pp. 61–80: 66.

12 Objects by *vistiamari* exhibited in the *Mostra Etnografica Siciliana*, from Palermo e *l'Esposizione nazionale del 1891-92: cronaca illustrata*, Milan 1892, 18, p. 138



national event. The Palermo exhibition included a pavilion dedicated to the *Mostra Etnografica Siciliana*,<sup>51</sup> presenting materials related to the habits and traditions of Sicilian popular culture. The objects on display in this case had been collected, classified, and organized by Giuseppe Pitrè,<sup>52</sup> a medical doctor committed to the study of popular traditions that at the time had already undertaken the editing of the twenty-five volumes of his *Biblioteca delle tradizioni popolari siciliane*,<sup>53</sup> an enterprise that made him the pioneer of Italian folklore studies. The catalogue of the ethnographic exhibition held in Palermo testifies to the methodological strictness he gave the new discipline: classified according to nine categories,<sup>54</sup> the objects are labeled in the local dialect, followed by the Italian translation.

The *Mostra Etnografica Siciliana* mostly presented objects of everyday life. Sicilian carts and traditional clothing were put on display together with objects related to popular devotion, such as votive tablets – one of them painted by a Sicilian survivor of the Battle of Dogali<sup>55</sup> – and amulets testifying to the persistence of an atavistic superstition.<sup>56</sup> In addition, the Sicilian ethnographer Salvatore Salomone Marino, a collaborator of Giuseppe Pitrè, gave particular attention to the works realized by the *vistiamari*, the Sicilian shepherds (Fig. 12). This collection consisting of carved utensils, decorated musical instruments, and small devotional sculptures was celebrated as peasant's *Belle Arti* and praised for its spontaneous artistic expression.<sup>57</sup>

<sup>51</sup> *Catalogo illustrato della Mostra Etnografica Siciliana*, ed. by Giuseppe Pitrè, Palermo 1892.

<sup>52</sup> On the figure of Giuseppe Pitrè (Palermo, 1841–1916) see Alberto Mario Cirese, “Giuseppe Pitrè: tra storia locale e antropologia”, in: *Pitrè e Salomone Marino*, Palermo 1968, pp. 19–49; Pasqualina Manzo, *Storia e folklore nell'opera museografica di Giuseppe Pitrè*, Frattamaggiore 1999.

<sup>53</sup> Giuseppe Pitrè, *Biblioteca delle tradizioni popolari siciliane*, Palermo 1870–1913.

<sup>54</sup> The nine categories in the *Catalogo illustrato* (note 51) are: “I. Costumi, II. Oggetti d'uso domestico, III. Pastorizia, agricoltura e caccia, IV. Veicoli, alimenti, spettacoli e feste, V. Alimenti, VI. Spettacoli e feste, VII. Amuleti –

ex voto, VIII. Giocattoli e balocchi fanciulleschi, IX. Libri e libretti che il popolino legge o si fa leggere.”

<sup>55</sup> Finaldi (note 16), p. 239.

<sup>56</sup> Vivien Greene analyzed the *Mostra Etnografica Siciliana* in the context of post-unification Italy's imagery and in relation to Italian colonial endeavor. On the basis of the display of ethnographic materials, she demonstrated how the stereotype that described Sicily as the ‘other’ Africa was strengthened by the Palermo exhibition (Vivien Greene, “The ‘other’ Africa: Giuseppe Pitrè's ‘Mostra Etnografica Siciliana’ [1891–92]”, in: *Journal of Modern Italian Studies*, XVII [2012], pp. 288–309).

<sup>57</sup> Salvatore Salomone Marino, “Costumi ed usanze dei contadini di Sicilia

13 "Tipi di popolani nei dintorni di Palermo (fotografia di Eugenio Interguglielmi)", in: *Palermo e l'Esposizione nazionale del 1891-92: cronaca illustrata*, Milan 1892, 6, cover



TIPI DI POPOLANI DEI DINTORNI DI PALERMO (fotografia di Eugenio Interguglielmi).

Strong comparisons originated from the reception of the *Mostra Eritrea* and the *Mostra Etnografica Siciliana*. The first one aimed to present Abyssinian society and culture through the display of ethnographical and artistic objects, the reconstruction of traditional architectures, and the living exhibition of natives, fostering the stereotype of a primitive and inferior society. On the other hand, Pitre's ethnographical exhibition, even with its scientific aims, had put in evidence the most picturesque and ancient habits of the Sicilian populace, at that time still alive in the more remote areas of the island. In the journals, the reviewers frequently referred to Sicilian habits with the same terminology used to describe Abyssinian culture.<sup>58</sup> They considered Sicilian customs as an expression of the 'primitive' or defined them as "costumi bizzarri, semiorientali, o addirittura selvaggi".<sup>59</sup> Mario Liberto, reviewing the

*Mostra Etnografica Siciliana*, invited the reader of the *Son-zogno* journal to visit the exhibition with these words:

Incontrate, in mezzo alla buona gente del volgo, nei villaggi remoti, sia per le spiagge bacciate dal mare, o sui gioghi delle Madonie, delle tradizioni ripetute con la fede viva di chi giurerebbe sulla loro verità: scoprite miti d'una freschezza primitiva, pregiudizii gelosamente custoditi. – Osserviate questa gente nelle sue convinzioni, nella sua fantasia, ne' suoi affetti, nella sua vita spicciola d'ogni dì – [...] vi trovate sempre innanzi un elemento al quale non siete più avvezzi, conservato nella purezza della sua verginità. È un altro mondo, il quale vi attrae, v'incanta e vi fa pensare: è una psiche collettiva, meravigliosa, così ricca, così varia, così forte nella sua primitività [...]. Affrettatevi: non vi rimarrà a lungo da godere la freschezza di questo spettacolo.<sup>60</sup>

all'esposizione: le Belle Arti presso i contadini", in: *Palermo e l'Esposizione nazionale* (note 9), 18, pp. 138f.

<sup>58</sup> On the parallels between the approaches to the study of popular traditions and of African populations, see Dickie (note 7), pp. 100–111.

<sup>59</sup> "La Mostra Etnografica", in: *L'Esposizione nazionale illustrata di Palermo* (note 10), p. 27 ("bizarre customs, semi-oriental, or even savage").

<sup>60</sup> Mario Liberto, "A proposito della mostra etnografica", *ibidem*, pp. 78f. ("You encounter, among the good common people, in remote villages, alongside the shores kissed by the sea or on the yokes of the Madonie, traditions repeated with the fervent faith of those who would swear to their truth: you discover myths of a primitive freshness, jealously guarded prejudices. – If you observe these people in their convictions, phantasy, affections,



14 "Motivi palermitani (fotografie di Eugenio Interguglielmi)", in: *Palermo e l'Esposizione nazionale del 1891-92: cronaca illustrata*, Milan 1892, 30, p. 237

This approach to Sicilian popular culture as 'other', according to an Orientalist discourse within Italy itself,<sup>61</sup> was at that time strongly diffused and asserted on the basis of biological evolutionism and racial determinism. This process was especially favored by Southern intellectuals and liberal élites, who articulated a profound critique of their native society and governments, thus becoming the first interlocutors of Northerners' negative views.<sup>62</sup> A case in point is the Sicilian anthropologist Alfredo Niceforo, one of the first to use the expression "two Italies" and to stress the difference between Northerners and Southerners,<sup>63</sup> even labeling the South as a colony to be civilized.<sup>64</sup>

in their simple everyday life – [...] you always find yourself in front of an element to which you are no longer accustomed, preserved in the pureness of its virginity. It is another world, which attracts you, enchants you, and makes you think: it is a marvelous collective psyche, so rich, so varied, so strong in its primitiveness [...]. Hurry, you will not have much time to enjoy the freshness of this spectacle.")

<sup>61</sup> Jane Schneider, "The Dynamics of Neo-Orientalism in Italy (1848–1995)", in: *Italy's "Southern Question"* (note 7), pp. 1–23.

<sup>62</sup> Nelson Moe, "Altro che Italia!: il Sud dei piemontesi (1860–61)", in: *Meridiana*, 15 (1992), pp. 53–89.

This perspective, together with the comparison between Sicily and Africa, is patent in the exhibition.

In Palermo, the fictional Abyssinian village was acclaimed as the main attraction, but the event was also the occasion to present Sicilian 'types' themselves and their picturesque popular environments that had entered the Italian imagination through the recent Verist literature: *Vita dei Campi* and *I Malavoglia* di Giovanni Verga were both published at the beginning of the 1880s, offering readers a cross-section of the most indigent social life in Sicily.

On the cover of one of the installments of the Treves journal<sup>65</sup> there was a photograph by Eugenio Interguglielmi<sup>66</sup> with the caption *Tipi di popolani dei dintorni di Palermo* (Fig. 13), representing several people

<sup>63</sup> Alfredo Niceforo, *Italiani del Nord e italiani del Sud*, Turin 1901. On this paradigm and dichotomy, see Silvana Patriarca, "How Many Italies? Representing the South in Official Statistics", in: *Italy's "Southern Question"* (note 7), pp. 77–98; Mariella Pandolfi, "Two Italies: Rhetorical Figures of Failed Nationhood", *ibidem*, pp. 285–289.

<sup>64</sup> Alfredo Niceforo, *L'Italia barbara contemporanea (studi ed appunti)*, Milan 1898, p. 6.

<sup>65</sup> *Palermo e l'Esposizione nazionale* (note 9), p. 6.

<sup>66</sup> On Eugenio Interguglielmi see Michele Di Dio/Erminia Scaglia, *Gli Interguglielmi: una dinastia di fotografi*, Palermo 2003.

15 “La vita popolare a Palermo: I pescatori (fotografia G. Interguglielmi)”, in: *Palermo e l'Esposizione nazionale del 1891-92: cronaca illustrata*, Milan 1892, 31, p. 245



La vita popolare a Palermo: I PESCATORI (fotografia G. Interguglielmi).

on a donkey-drawn Sicilian cart. Even if it is possible to distinguish in the last row a bourgeois family, the only people protecting themselves from the sun with some umbrellas, they are all classified as *popolani*. The journal gave great attention to the representation of Palermo’s lower classes, grouping them by captions following analogous criteria to those used by the Sonzogno journal in the representation of Abyssinian families and traditional architectures (Figs. 9a, 9b). A sequence entitled *Motivi palermitani* (Fig. 14) reproduces two other photographs by Eugenio Interguglielmi catching Sicilian popular everyday life: the *Venditrice di frutta* (fruitseller) lingering on the threshold together with her relatives embodies a prototype of the peasant social class, whereas the image on the right side, titled *Una viuzza* (a narrow street), focuses attention

on a narrow passage constricted by some ruined architectures.<sup>67</sup> In the following instalment a photograph representing some fishermen on the shoreline with a view from above is more explicitly titled *La vita popolare a Palermo: I pescatori* (Fig. 15).<sup>68</sup>

In the Sonzogno journal another reviewer of the *Mostra Etnografica Siciliana* writes:

Ora in Sicilia, dove tante razze si sono seguite nel dominio, e tutte hanno lasciato dei residui che per così dire lo rappresentano ancora; dove le diverse civiltà – da quella barbarica, di cui abbiamo uno schizzo nella Mostra Eritrea, alla più elevata e moderna, che risplende nelle principali città – sono quasi contemporanee, uno studio comparativo di costumi, di tradizioni, di abitudini, doveva riuscire ricco ed istruttivo [...].<sup>69</sup>

<sup>67</sup> The same sequence had been published before by Treves with the caption “Nei dintorni di Palermo (fotografie di Eugenio Interguglielmi – Riproduzione diretta)” in *L'Illustrazione Italiana*, XVII (1890), 49, cover. See Greene (note 56), pp. 298f.

<sup>68</sup> On ethnographic photography in Italy see Francesco Faeta/Antonello Ricci, *Lo specchio infedele: materiali per lo studio della fotografia etnografica in Italia*, Rome 1997. On photography and the ‘primitive’ in post-unification Italy see Lindsay Harris, “Photography of the ‘Primitive’ in Italy: Perceptions of the Peasantry at the Turn of the Twentieth Century”, in: *Journal of Modern Italian*

*Studies*, XVII (2012), pp. 310–330. On the stereotyped representation of the *Meridione* see Dickie (note 7), pp. 83–119.

<sup>69</sup> “La Mostra Etnografica” (note 59). (“Now, in Sicily, where many races followed one another in rule, all leaving traces that, so to speak, still represent it; where the different civilizations – from the barbaric one, of which we have a sketch in the Mostra Eritrea, to the more elevated and modern, which shines in the principal cities – are almost contemporary, a comparative study of customs, traditions, habits, must have succeeded in being rich and instructive [...].”)

Thus, the reviewer acknowledged that multiple cultures coexisted in the same region and declared the intent of a comparative study through the ethnographical objects. Sicily could be modern and prosperous in the pavilions that showed the most brilliant examples of regional enterprise. Yet at the same time a primordial popular culture still survived on the island, tangible in its atavistic traditions and superstitions testified by the materials displayed in the *Mostra Etnografica Siciliana*. Similarly, two strongly divergent social layers inhabited the island: the aristocratic and bourgeois people, protagonists in the journal's illustrations as organizers or visitors of the exhibition, and the *popolani*, who were themselves part of the spectacle. As a result, this supposedly most backward and primitive Italian populace could be compared with the Abyssinian population, considered by the contemporary anthropological theories as one of the most advanced among African societies.

In the 1891 National Exhibition, Italy outlined its profile as a colonizing nation taking advantage of its internal Orientalism and assuming an imperialist attitude over Sicily, perceived, together with the other southern regions, as the 'other' Italy. In this way the city of Palermo, with its multilayered cultural identity, became a place of negotiation for the internal and external othernesses Italy was facing.

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#### Abstract

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The article focuses on the National Exhibition held in Palermo in 1891/92, the first organized in a city of the *Meridione*. The event became for Italy the occasion to stage its recent colonial ambitions and settlement and to celebrate the newly-acquired colony of Eritrea through the arrangement of a fictional village inhabited by a group of people coming from East Africa. Conceptualizing the exhibition as 'meta-media', the article examines, through visual and textual materials, some pivotal points of the event: the *Belle Arti* section, the *Mostra Eritrea*, and the *Mostra Etnografica Siciliana*. It traces the developing narratives representing Italy as a colonizing nation and comparing the colonized Eritrean population and Sicilian popular culture, which was also subjected to an internal colonialism. An imperialist attitude toward Sicily emerges within the exhibition and its media. Sicily was perceived as an 'other' Italy and became a site of negotiation of internal and external othernesses the nation was facing at that time.

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#### Photo Credits

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*From La Rana, 17, 27 April 1888: Fig. 1. – From Palermo e l'Esposizione nazionale (note 9): Figs. 2–5, 8, 12–15. – From L'Esposizione nazionale illustrata (note 10): Figs. 6, 9a, 9b, 10. – Assemblée Regionale Siciliana, Palermo: Fig. 7. – From Guida della Mostra Eritrea (note 44): Fig. 11.*

