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The Myth of ‘*Mare Nostrum*’: Themes and Exhibitions, Legacy and Experimentation in the Construction of Mediterranean Fascist Italy

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Abstract

This essay aims to analyse the ways in which the myth of the *Mare nostrum* entered into the artistic iconography of the early twentieth century. It was highly amplified during the Fascist regime thanks to some relevant graphic works, monumental commissions and, above all, temporary exhibitions that were characterized by a propagandistic overtone. The representation of a Mediterranean (in fact Italian) common identity became a fundamental part of a pervasive political strategy. The stylistic choices were conditioned both by the need to emphasize the glorious return of “Latinness” and the incardination of the “new” fascist modernity.

Sintesi

Il saggio si propone di analizzare, attraverso alcuni esempi di rilievo, la fortuna del mito del *Mare nostrum* nei primi decenni del novecento. In particolare, durante il regime fascista l’idea di una mediterraneità romana fu amplificata a tutti i livelli della cultura visiva, grazie alla pubblicazione di inserti grafici, alle committenze ufficiali e, soprattutto, alla considerevole eco “pubblicitaria” delle esposizioni temporanee. Le scelte stilistiche, parte di una vera e propria strategia dell’immagine, furono condizionate dalla volontà di enfatizzare la rinascita del glorioso passato nazionale e, al contempo, presentare la sedicente modernità del regime.

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The Misleading Origins of a Myth

The Latin expression “*Mare nostrum*”, that is to say “Our Sea”, used to indicate the Mediterranean Sea, is still used today. As we all remember, back in October 2013, the Italian government set up *Mare Nostrum*, a vast search-and-rescue operation aimed at preventing the deaths of the thousands of migrants who make their journey from Africa to Europe every year. Alongside, many contemporary artists are inclined to explore new and dense acceptations of “*Mare nostrum*” and Mediterraneanness: for example, the Studio Azzurro, an important Italian collective engaged since the early 1980s in technological and environmental research, presented at Castel Sant’Elmo in Naples the traveling exhibition *Mediterranean Meditation* (2002), which consisted in five interactive installations or “unstable landscapes” that lyrically showed the common Mediterranean identity and the cultural fluidity behind a borderless property. In 2019, the poet and performer Jorg Grünert proposed at It.a.cà Festival a touching synthesis of what *Mare nostrum* represents now with the reconstruction of a poor child’s grave hanging from the ceiling, a shovel near a grey marble tombstone, a video of the sea waves projected over these objects, while a female voice in the background revisited and overturned Ulysses’ journey into a sepulchral tale. There is no doubt that the phrase “*Mare nostrum*” currently evokes complex and many-faceted scenarios, entering with all its ambiguities and paradoxes in the methodological discourse of scholars.¹

However, the common belief that the Italo-centric idea has ancient origins and that the Romans called the Mediterranean Sea as “our” with a huge amount of pride and sense of superiority is a pretty inaccurate assumption. According to recent studies, it has become evident that the term was introduced in the Latin vocabulary from Greek texts, where we can read about «*παρ’ ἡμῖν θαλάττης*», as Aristoteles wrote. In the ancient past, the name was never related to the Imperial power or to the

Roman expansionist aims but only to geographical locations: *Mare nostrum* because this sea was near and familiar, in opposition to the far and unexplored Ocean. «*Post Ocean nihil*» Seneca noted, indicating the lack of certainties beyond all the known. Alfonso Traina and Bruna Pieri explained in great depth the misuse of this apparent declaration of possess, stressing that it wasn’t understood by the Romans in a political or dominating sense.²

The misunderstanding was created and fomented by Italian nationalism in the second half of the 19th century and grew during the long historical process of the nation-building.³ Such Myths and stereotypes—with their ubiquitous presence in the Italian cultural landscape—promoted the image of a united and strong nation, legitimized by history to exist and take over a significant part of the world, contrary to the plethora of local identities still in existence.⁴ The references to the Italian imperishable thalassocracy seemed to follow in a specular way the successes and defeats of the country in foreign policy and they were used for many decades as a perfect instrument of propaganda. After the World War I and the feeling of “mutilated victory” resulting from it, the longing for national redemption, for a glorious and fictitious revival became even more tangible. Right from the start, symbolically marked with the March on Rome (1922), Fascism included “*Mare nostrum*” in the ingredients of its political religion⁵ and let this faith contribute to the movement’s programme and assimilation. From another perspective, the myth was one of the numerous nuances and meanings by which *Romanità*, or *Romanness*, flourished.⁶ The simulacrum of the

² Alfonso Traina and Bruna Pieri, “‘Mare nostrum’. Leggenda e realtà di un possessivo,” *Latinitas. Series nova* 2, no. 1 (2014): 13–18. See also Stefano Trinchese, ed., *Mare Nostrum: Percezione ottomana e mito mediterraneo in Italia all'alba del '900* (Milan: Gerini Studio, 2005), 97–147.

³ On the place of antiquity in the construction of the Italian nation, cf. Antonio De Francesco, *The Antiquity of the Italian Nation: The Cultural Origins of a Political Myth in Modern Italy, 1796–1953* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013).

⁴ Andrea Perrone, “Mare nostrum e ‘Geopolitica’. Il mito imperiale dei geografi italiani,” *Diacronie. Studi di storia contemporanea* 25, no. 1 (2016): 1–20; Samuel Agmabu, “Mare Nostrum: Italy and the Mediterranean of Ancient Rome in the Twentieth and Twenty-First Centuries,” *Fascism* 8, no. 2 (2019): 250–274.

⁵ The theory of the “sacralization of politics” as it was formulated by Emilio Gentile, *Il culto del littorio* (Bari: Editori Laterza, 2009): 20–32.

⁶ The subject of Italian *Romanità* received a great scholarly interest in recent decades. Still Fundamental are: Romke Visser, “Fascist Doctrine and the Cult of the ‘Romanità,’” *Journal of Contemporary History* 27, no. 1 (1992): 5–12; Andrea Giardina and André Vauchez, ed., *Il Mito di Roma: da Carlo Magno a Mussolini* (Rome-Bari: Laterza, 2000). Add it all the interesting studies by Nelis, as Jan Nelis, “Back to the Future: Italian

¹ For instance, see Claudio Fogu, “From *Mare nostrum* to *Mare Aliorum*: Mediterranean Theory and Mediterraneanism in Contemporary Italian Thought,” *California Italian Studies* 1, no. 1 (2010). Retrieved from <https://escholarship.org/uc/item/7vp210p4>.

identification between Italian and Mediterranean culture occupied a prominent role in the political imaginary of Fascism, also due to the fact that the visual arts were totally involved in the amplification and transformation of that vague mixture of past and present into a strong, incisive, and convincing message for all the users.

This article explores a selection of remarkable case studies by which we can analyse the aestheticization of political discourse and the different formal results that during the entire *Ventennio* brought out the Italian priority over the Mediterranean area, because of the spectacular and certain dystopian renaissance of the past. In particular, temporary exhibitions revealed themselves as a central weapon inside the consent factory, generating a peculiar sounding board for all the metaphorical aspects. On a more general level, the study touches upon the problem of artistic engagement, as it shows how architects, painters, sculptors, and designers became a determining force in the development of one of the most omnipresent myths encouraged by the fascist regime.

Two Images Compared: New Fascist Canons for the Narration of “Mare nostrum”

In the midst of the Italo-Turkish War or Libyan War, the illustrated magazine *Noi e il Mondo* featured two different works by Giulio Bargellini (1869–1936), connected to each other.⁷ In relation to the first, the use of a mythological substrate was made explicit by the representation of an ancient sculpture with an impending battleship behind; the wind is blowing on Italian flags and the navigation looks safe and unstoppable (Fig. 1).

The sea journey seems protected and directed by the disproportioned representation of the goddess *Athena Parthenos*—the lost giant sculpture

by Fidia, known at that time through illustrations in archaeological essays or later copies, such as the one preserved in the Palazzo Altemps Collection. This golden secessionist *Athena* is wearing her traditional attributes, as does the small Nike she holds in her palm, even if the author had no philological intention. For his redundant chromolithograph, Bargellini drew inspiration from the famous Angelo Zanelli sculpture of triumphant *Rome*: the fixed and motionless guard of the Altar of the Fatherland, fulcrum of the articulated decorative programme in which the Florentine artist took part himself.⁸ The sculpture, installed in 1925 but conceived in 1909 as a natural Roman re-appropriation of the Greek pantheon, fast became a recognizable symbol of the young but sempiternal capital city and it was replicated in infinite variations, especially through print.⁹ The image by Bargellini, published in 1912 and significantly titled *Mare nostrum*, is a curious and full of details *pastiche* where the precise introduction of an ancient recognizable element, not Roman but Romanized, helps to evoke the perennial (cultural and ethical) strength of the Italian people. The clear readability of the signs suggests that sailing is a timeless mission, governed by the icon of a fully armed warrior; the goal of this departure could be just an illusory sea. The work is closely connected to another emblematic interpretation of the Italian supremacy in the Mediterranean area, which sponsors the changes or maybe just the desires of changes in foreign affairs: in the April edition of the same magazine, Bargellini presented some veiled women sewing the tricoloured flag, alike the odalisques that could come out from the brush of an unoriginal orientalist painter. The name of the work is emblematic: *All'altra sponda*, which means both “On the other side” and “To the other coast” at once. What was proposed was a sort of fictional topography and a dedication to the “other part” of Italy too, halfway around the sea. The exotic accents were progressively absorbed by racial and

Fascist Representations of the Roman Past,” *Fascism: Journal of Comparative Fascist Studies* 3, no. 1 (2014): 1–19.

⁷ Giulio Bargellini, “Mare Nostrum,” *Noi e il Mondo. Rivista Illustrata della Tribuna* 2, no. 2 (February 1912): s.p.; Giulio Bargellini, “All'altra sponda,” *Noi e il Mondo. Rivista Illustrata della Tribuna* 2, no. 4 (April 1912): s.p.

⁸ In the vast bibliography on the *Vittoriano*, note Massimo Tedeschi, Roberta Gallotti and Vincenzo Lonati, *Altare della Patria, Cento anni di un monumento “bresciano”* (Brescia: Grafo, 2011), 129–135.

⁹ The critical fortune of the Zanelli’s work, still in progress at that moment, was alighted by the illustrated volume Mario Lago, ed., *Angelo Zanelli*, (Roma: Romagna, 1911).

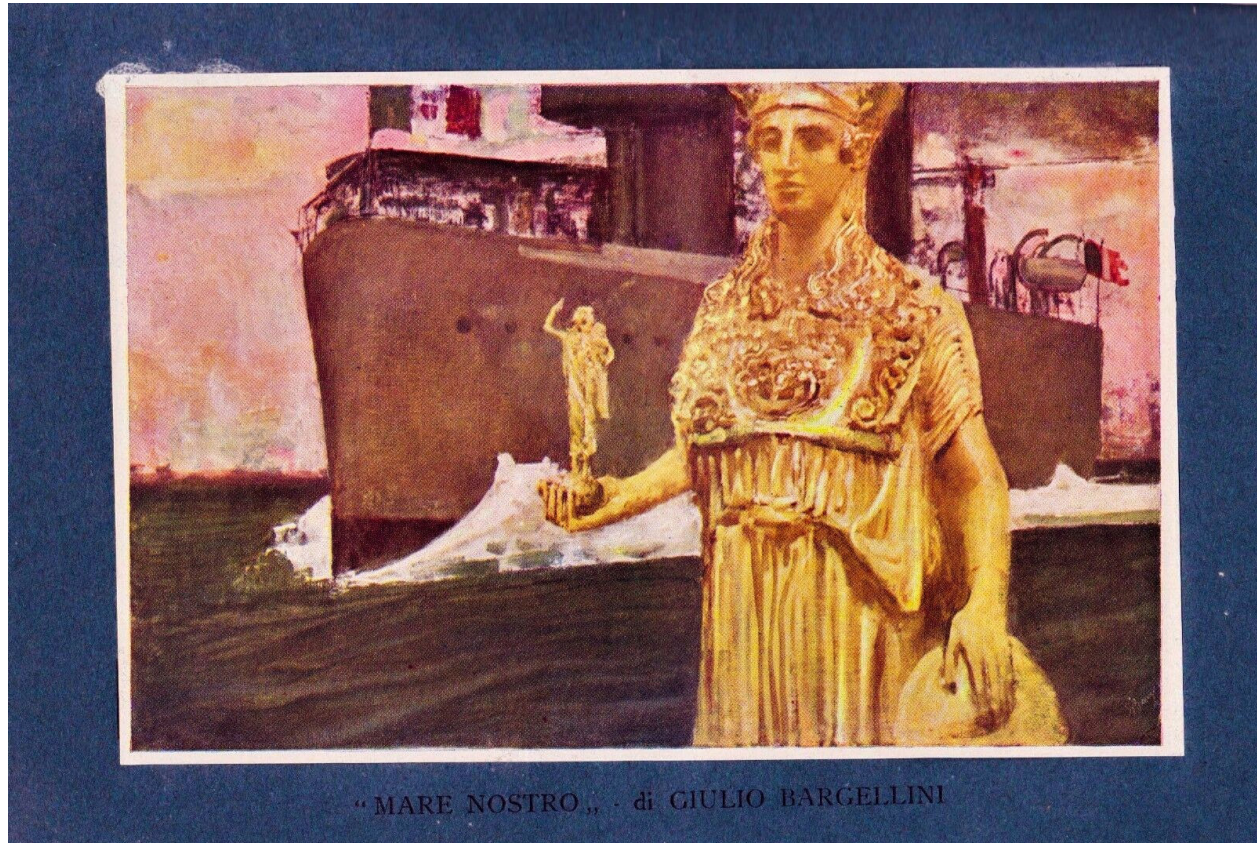


Figure 1. Giulio Bargellini, “Mare nostro”, *Noi e il Mondo. Rivista Illustrata della Tribuna*, February 1912.

colonialist points of view. Already at the beginning of the century, portraying otherness had become a distortive way to overemphasize self-portraying.¹⁰

Those two self-celebrating inserts, published in one of the best-selling illustrated magazines of the time, reflected the needs of simple and decodable identitarian formulas during the Libyan campaign; a fundamental piece in the process of “making Italians” which had started fifty years ago. The escalation of the war abroad coincided with a large diffusion of images in which the persistence of some *topos* highlighted the historical legitimacy of Italian dominion, apart from its invented and forced nature, while also solidifying the sense of being one nation. So, the idea of *Mare nostrum* grew simultaneously with the Italian importance in the “Scramble for Africa”, when the widespread inadequacy in comparison

with other European powers and the collective inferiority complex needed an abstract counterbalance.

To reinforce the claim, we can add that Bargellini, in his prolific career as a public decorator, attended at last the construction of one of the first Italian *signa* in Tripoli¹¹, composing the traditional mosaic decorations running along the classical prospectus of Cesare Bazzani’s temple dedicated to the Fallen.¹² The Libyan monument, which has been destroyed, created an unnatural but efficient connexion between the homeland and the “other lands”, because it was based on the implantation of the formal alphabet of conquerors and their fragile archetypes. *Rome* finally landed overseas.

¹⁰ On the complex definition of colonial art, Dominique Jarrassé, “L’art colonial, entre orientalisme et art primitif. Recherches d’une définition,” *Histoire de l’art* no 51 (November 2002): 3–16.

¹¹ For the analysis of the first ceremonial places in Italian colonies, see Marco Bizzocchi, “Luoghi della memoria e culto dei caduti italiani in Tripolitania (1911–1914),” *Storia e futuro* 12, no 31 (March 2013), <http://storiaefuturo.eu/luoghi-della-memoria-e-culto-dei-caduti-italiani-in-tripolitania-1911-1914/>.

¹² In the catalogue of the artist there are two models refer to this project but erroneously linked to the construction of a fountain in Tripoli. For the framework of Bargellini’s activity, Anna Maria Damigella, “Giulio Bargellini e la decorazione della Sala del Consiglio”, in *Il Palazzo Nuovo della Banca d’Italia*, ed. Maurizio Berri and Marco Pagliara (Roma: Centro Stampa della Banca d’Italia, 2008), 131–194.

The awareness of a geographical and moral redesign was touted even at a more popular and prosaic level than Bargellini did: just consider the large number of postcards where Gabriele D’Annunzio’s verses dedicated to *Mare nostrum* were highlighted or the many graphic works replicating the connubium between pigeonholed roman characters and current intentions. From 1907 to 1920 the Italian Naval League published the trade magazine *Mare nostrum*, involving some important artists in the building of rhetorical marine iconography. On the *Tribuna Illustrata*, the Mediterranean Sea became an open egg with the borders and all the major cities of Tripolitania in sight: a new-born sea of ours, precisely.¹³

Nonetheless, Bargellini’s expressive choices and his *Athena* proved at the highest degree the persistence of some sophisticated decadent accents and the holdover of a particular Nordic late Symbolism. In close proximity with Giulio Aristide Sartorio and Galileo Chini, who are interpreters of a unique neo-Michelangelo’s signature style, the painter is considered in the academic studies as a convincing interpreter of the official and staid style, called *Umbertino*, which started maturing in Italy in the last decades of the Nineteenth century but also resisted in the subsequent period with its academic and conventional elements, despite the disruptive blossoming of avant-gardes. To demonstrate a certain level of modernity and thematic actualization, Bargellini introduces a state-of-the-art ship in the background, but, after all, the bizarre juxtaposition generates a real dyscrasia and documents the (vain) efforts to revitalise the eclectic vocabulary from within.

Ten years later, when Mussolini came to power, the “liberal” style was regarded as completely inappropriate to illustrate the “revolutionary” fascist ideology and it was evident that the public patron would support just the brand-new aesthetic code which was best able to differentiate itself from its “dusty” predecessors. The classical legacy of Rome should have been cultivated avoiding archaeologist refolding and commonplace historicisms. Unlike other

dictatorships, the newly installed regime allowed a plurality of styles and tolerated a relatively open debate in the artistic field, albeit in the exclusive context of the construction of fascist art which, for this reason, turned out to be ever more massive and pervasive. The visual arts were supposed to be in line with the new historical age in “blackshirt” and create an original formula, sweeping away the late 19th century temperament. In this perspective, even the visual translation of *Mare nostrum* had to transform and reinforce itself, regardless of the substantially static period in foreign policy: in that moment, in fact, foreign policy choices were completely subordinate to domestic policy and the myth lost his strict connection with African wars, living its own life. At first, Mussolini was “in his toes” in Africa, consolidating the land obtained before; but every little success was presented as a stage of unstoppable growth, back to the terrific past.

Among the most interesting and rare results of mythical Italy’s representation in the first dictatorial period, we can count an inedited sketch by Sironi (1924), known as *Mare nostrum* (Fig. 2).¹⁴

Mario Sironi (1885–1961) played a seminal role in the development of fascist imaginary, becoming Fascism’s foremost mythmaker.¹⁵ The artist was a founding and dynamic member of the *Novecento* group, under the critical aegis of Margherita Sarfatti, whose ambitious purpose was to re-establish a recognizable national style. The general *rappel à l’ordre* determined an ideal return of Italian pictorial and sculptural tradition and a reference to the macro-category of classicism, where mechanisms of allusion and evocation ruled out banal and old-timer quotes. In the spring of 1923, Mussolini attended to the inaugural exhibition of that group of painters at the Pesaro Gallery and declared his intention to encourage artistic research without establishing a State-sanctioned aesthetics. The close connubium between *Novecento* and the dictatorship is a well-known topic in specialized literature,

¹³ See the front cover, by an unidentified author, published on *Noi e il Mondo. Rivista Illustrata della Tribuna* 2, no. 4 (April 1912); on the same theme but some years later, also see Tommaso Sillani, *Mare nostrum* (Milan: Editori Alfieri e Lacroix, 1917).

¹⁴ Thanks to Andrea Sironi and the “Mario Sironi Association” for their support in identifying the work.

¹⁵ The definition coined by Emilie Braun, in her *Mario Sironi and Italian Modernism: Art and Politics under Fascism* (Cambridge: University Press, 2001).



Figure 2. Mario Sironi, *Mare nostrum*, ca. 1924. Private Collection, Courtesy of the Association “Mario Sironi”.

as are the professional and personal ties that bound some figures like Sironi and Sarfatti to Mussolini. However, Elena Pontiggia clarified that the work of the major artists of the group, even when their subjects belonged to the fascist mythography, were never narcissistic public celebrations, since the artists’ mastery of style transformed them into dramatic, visionary, or metaphysical icons: all of them. The exception were the deliberately triumphalist images with the immediate and rhetorical legibility

typical of State art, especially in the last period of the regime.¹⁶ All of Sironi’s artistic production, from his countless drawings to his relevant monumental projects, was based on the transmutation of the sense of fatality, seriousness, and gravitas that the Fascist “religion” needed.

¹⁶ Elena Pontiggia, “Novecento and State Art”, in *Post Zang Tumb Tuuum. Ars Life Politics. Italia 1918-1943*, ed., Germano Celant (Milano: Fondazione Prada, 2018), 148-153.

His little work dedicated to an unreal sea opens to an original representation of sailing with shadowy and expressionistic accents. A ship and a triumphal arch, fronting a low horizon, are floating above a deep grey and leaden sea; no human presence, although the dense black lines on the white corner look like stylised groups of people who crowd the shore. The two monumental and phantasmatic objects are hanging over nothing, carrying out the process of subtracting things from timelines and translating them onto an immutable vision that characterized *Novecento*'s intents. Sironi interpreted, in his typical gloomy notes, the metahistorical felling of nemesis and glory, which had no elements in common with the solar and colourful Mediterranean *cliché*. Even if he used some of the canonical elements belonging to the image of *Mare nostrum*, a solid modern boat that sails inexorable to the future and the mention of the *Victory*—the top of the arch is dominated by a sculptural insert with a winged *Victory* that recalled the Arch of Peace in Milan—Sironi's sea alluded to the unavoidable destination of Italian history, with eternal returns and hauntings. In this unrestrained darkness, we also might have the impression that the arch is being carried away by the boat, thereby creating an allegorical exportation of status and culture. Metabolizing the lessons of Metaphysical art and Futurism's graphic innovation, the artist predilected a language reduced to a few vivid items, by which he could escape the risks of trite adulation and express his personal restlessness.

Probably, because of its small proportions, this tempera drawing could be connected to a series of graphic inserts populating the pages of *Popolo d'Italia* or *Rivista Illustrata del Popolo d'Italia*, the cultural supplement of the *Duce's* newspaper, with which Sironi collaborated for many years.¹⁷ If we calculate that in 1923 Sironi composed at least two hundred and sixty graphic works, as reported in his biographies, we can understand how the sketch of *Mare nostrum* could be symptomatic of his particular

¹⁷ On the artist's collaboration with the paper, Fabio Benzi, ed., *Mario Sironi. Disegni, progetti e bozzetti per il "Il Popolo d'Italia"* (Cesena: Manfredi, 2016), with reference bibliography.

“graphic-mania” of that period, linked to the necessity for visual diffusion of fascist ideology. On many issues, the illustrated magazine also declined on its front page the *leitmotiv* of the Italian going by seas, reinforcing the Mussolinian proclamations about the Roman/Mediterranean identity. A universe of triremes, Greek sculptures, columns, and more brutal fascist symbols or gestures revealed the useful appropriation of the past.¹⁸ The various declinations of some repeated elements entailed that *Romanità* took on a face sometimes threatening, sometimes reassuring. The black and white work by Sironi, in line with his rough and immovable subjects, which could have enriched the text plates with a modern and synthetic vision of Italian situation, transmitted the concept of ineluctable crossing and proposed an iconic reappropriation of some pseudo-historical models.

The myth of *Mare nostrum* that Fascism was preparing to implant familiarized also with this heavy sense of history; there was a clear dream of destiny, which never existed before, as if the nation was finally ready to accomplish his timeless mission, following the overthrow of “coward” democratic governments. As we can underline in relation to other vignettes and drawings, the readability of the images and the geographical subversion guaranteed communicative effectiveness at its most, but it was up to the artists to dose these symbols and to balance propaganda and expressive research. Sironi chose a dark and unique suspense to describe the feverish waiting for political redemption, conscious that the visual narrative of the sea could offer another device to the affirmation of fascist mythopoeisis. While Bargellini copied the ancients, Sironi had the ambition to evoke their spirit and their aesthetic assumptions, thereby enhancing the present.

Mussolini, Theorist of “*Mare nostrum*”

Even if some identarian themes were commonly present before the advent of Fascism, determining

¹⁸ Priscilla Manfren, “Archeologia e simboli della “romanitas” nella pubblicitaria e nella grafica fascista: il caso de “La Rivista Illustrata del Popolo d'Italia” (1923-1943),” *Tecla* 5, no 10 (2014): 24–61.

a long-standing continuity in the equivocal recovering of superb past, fascist autocracy fomented the faithful palingenesis of the ancient prestige as ever, thanks to a spreading monopoly on all the media. The idea of “*Mare nostrum*” was sponsored both at extensive and elitist levels, while the inflated historical primacy attracted a growing public approval. In particular, the educative plan strengthened the youthful enthusiasms, so much so that, in 1925, the contest for an elementary school textbook was won by the volume “*Fa di tutti i mari, il mare nostro*”, that sounded chauvinistically “Make of all the seas, our Sea”.

It was in the second half of the 1920s that the theme of “*Mare nostrum*” passed through an obsessive circulation, following the huge aestheticization of the policy carried out by Mussolini. The legacy of ancient Rome was instrumentalized in several ways and unified harmoniously with the will to power.¹⁹ In 1925, at the time when the Governorate was institutionalized, Mussolini spoke of the reconsecrated sea and the yearning of *Mare nostrum* in front of the Senate. These considerations were reiterated in 1926, at the Notaries Hall in Perugia, a prestigious stage where he delivered the speech *Roma antica sul mare* (*The Ancient Rome over the sea*), published for Mondadori shortly after.²⁰ At the start of the famous oration, Mussolini identified his reference bibliography and declaimed his ignorance about ancient history, pretending a humble approach; at the end, instead, he was able to demonstrate the turnaround in the passive situation of Italian history thanks to Fascism. The Mediterranean Sea should be considered a Great Lake under the Italian Power; a fatal scenario of the national achievements and comeback, so compulsory reading routes were offered to the historians who were working on the subject. The proclamation of Italian dominion renaissance was particularly felt: just months before, first among Italian politicians Mussolini arrived in Tripoli in the frame of the

international agricultural congress, he walked the ruins of Sabratha and Leptis Bagna and declared to see the hand of Providence in Italian historical circularity. Propaganda was multiplied by videos and photographs capturing Mussolini’s physical and ideal presence, noticing the consistency of *Mare nostrum*.²¹

In 1927, the International Fair was implanted and the *battage* was at the top. The Tripoline Fairs were the commercial and economic showcases of Libyan Italy but, for their part, they contributed to the spectacularizing program of the Mussolinian government. On such occasions, all the fascist leaders defended quite often the renewal of Roman power and mystified the continuity between past and presence with loud voice. This series of exhibitions was intended to communicate the value of Italy’s possessions to a wider audience, while also establishing stronger economic and commercial exchanges between Italy and North Africa. However, as Brian McLaren argued, the Tripoli Trade Fair also was a crucial medium through which a specific image of the Italian culture and society was disseminated to the indigenous populations of North Africa, and in the same manner to the homeland.²²

With regard to this communicative sense, we might examine one of the Fair advertising posters that undoubtedly raised the fascist *Mare nostrum*. (Fig. 3)

Unlike all the posters connected to the colonies, still dominated by askari, camels and Bedouin women, Virgilio Retrosi (1892–1975), a minor ceramist converted into poster designer, realized an emblematic *affiche* for the sixth edition of the fair, proposing a winged *Mercury*, with his foot firmly anchored to the city of Tripoli. The printed God is walking with his mouth open in a battle cry, holding the bridle of a winged Pegasus that appears with shaded and evanescent effects. The Mediterranean Sea is represented as a mutual space for classicism and power affirmation, a great

¹⁹ See Claudia Lazzaro, “Forging a Visible Fascist Nation: Strategies for Fusing Past and Present”, *Donatello among the Blackshirts: history and modernity in the visual culture of Fascist Italy*, Claudia Lazzaro and Roger J. Crum, ed., (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2005), 13–31.

²⁰ Benito Mussolini, *Roma antica sul mare* (Milan: Mondadori, 1926).

²¹ <http://senato.archivioluice.it/senato-luce/scheda/video/IL3000095973/1/IL-trionfale-viaggio-di-SE-Mussolini-in-Tripolitania.html>.

²² Brian L. McLaren, “The Tripoli Trade Fair and the Representation of Italy’s African Colonies,” *The Journal of Decorative and Propaganda Arts* 24 (2002): 170–197.



Figure 3. Virgilio Retrosi, Affiche, *International Fair of Tripoli*, 1932 (Treviso, Museo Nazionale Collezione Salce-Direzione Regionale Musei Veneto) © Ministry of Culture.

scenario for Italian aspirations. The figurative language of Retrosi is modelled on the choice of a few key elements, as the most up-to-date graphics experimentations.

In these years, the birth of Tripoli Fair and all the incessant political statements constituted the basic reference context to the Italian Marine Exhibitions and, overall, to all the artistic exhibitions that sacrificed their neutrality in favour of the political plot. Only to a casual observer, the temporary exhibitions dedicated to the sea were apolitical.

The “Mare nostrum” on Show

Analysing the connection between art and apology, it is possible to give count of the organization in Rome of three temporary exhibitions dedicated to the «Mystique of the Sea». The first edition of the *Esposizione di Arte Marinara* (“marinara” stands for seafaring or marine), inspired by the *Exposition of the Sea* (1922)²³, was promoted by the Italian

²³ Odo Samengo, “La Mostra del Mare a Trieste”, *Architettura* 2, no 1 (1922): 58–60.

Naval League and hosted a significant number of paintings, some sculptures and objects dedicated to the sea in its many aspects. All the rooms inside the Exposition Palace were filled with traditional bathers, still-life, views of sunny beaches, and portraits of fishermen. On many levels, this event is comparable to the exhibitions held at the end of the previous century, because of the diffuse regional order, or provincial attitude, and the absence of experimental works. Sironi’s work remained an exception for their quality and mythical remodeling. As well, in the declarations of the organizers there was a certain urgency to «harmonize with the rhythm of the regime».²⁴ The theoretical purpose of the exhibition was to become a basic part in training collective consciousness and narrating the new historical phase of Italy, a nation that in Mediterranean Sea had found and could find economic and politic power, as the organisers announced. The marine exhibits aimed to what we could define as an educational program, where the seafaring awareness coincides with an awareness of an identity getting stronger. From this point of view, any beach or sailing boat loses its noninvolvement and can be used for the “Mediterranean” fascist fiction, to the advantage of the “a place in the sun” idea. The artworks remained “behind” for stylistic reasons, but not their rhetorical interpretation, which justifies two different levels of reading.²⁵

In order to evoke a new moral code around “marine” issues and forge new fascist men, a temporary environment of great effect was created, to let the public know the vigorous and masculine protagonists of seafaring era under construction: Pieretto Bianco, who joined the project as artist and exhibition designer occupied with eight big canvas the Main Hall of the palace. Among other things, Bianco (1875–1937) was an important set designer, well-known in Italy and abroad. The first admirer of his work was Giulio Aristide Sartorio, a fundamental

symbolist painter still in activity at the beginning of the 1920s, who was present at the jury of the Venetian Biennale (1912), where Bianco exhibited a decorative cycle consisting in fourteen huge panels dedicated to the theme of venetian working awakening. It was exactly a part of these canvases which was reused at the Marine Exhibition in 1926, but the “old” frieze was re-interpreted in the light of the rising fascist mythology. Bianco modified his work’s iconography, eliminating from the triptychs what was most traceable to Venice scenes and translating the marine story into a more generic and fitting exaltation of labor and human fatigue. It was introduced in the catalogue by Fausto Salvatori, who explains that Bianco’s space exalts the *Mare nostrum* and embodies the Mediterranean ambition, because “this sea was Italic and now returns into a vision of Empire”.²⁶ (Fig. 4)

We may speculate that the friendship between the painter and Sartorio strengthened at the Marine Exhibition, because of the older master’s participation in the jury and placement of the works: the support expressed by one of the most renowned artists was an impregnable pass. Moreover, Sartorio’s recent activity occupied two important rooms at the exhibition, in which a hundred works carried out during the trip to South America of the “Italia” Cruise (1924) were exhibited. The journey to Latin America, considered one of the first successes of the Fascist foreign policy and reported in the press through thousands of anecdotes, was a source of inspiration for the artist-traveler called to immortalize the beauty of the places, their strenuous exploration, and contact with the otherness.²⁷ But, in the preface he wrote for his monographic show, Sartorio offered a key to understand the testimonies of the trip to unknown worlds, abandoning orientalist habits and declaring the strength of Italian cultural settlement all over the world: the “Latinism” of his room was amplified by the insertion of a red African vase, composing a dense and significant mix.

²⁴ *Prima Mostra d’arte marinara promossa dalla Lega Navale Italiana, Roma MCMXXVI-MCMXXVII, Palazzo dell’Esposizione*, Exhibit Catalogue (Roma: Edizioni Pinci, 1926); Arturo Lancellotti, “La prima Mostra Nazionale d’Arte Marinara,” *L’Italia Marinara*, no 1 (January–March 1927): 16–18.

²⁵ For a more extensive analysis, Aurora Roscini Vitali, *Roma e le esposizioni coloniali. La messa in scena della diversità durante il fascismo* (Cisu, Roma: La Sapienza, 2020), 79–90; Ea., *Roma e le esposizioni del Fascismo. Arte e architettura dell’effimero*, Doctorate Thesis (Roma: La Sapienza, 2016), 107–123.

²⁶ The verses are similar to those of poem *Mare nostrum*, by the same author. Unless otherwise indicated, translations are mine.

²⁷ On Sartorio “American” works, Bruno Mantura, *Sartorio 1924. Crociera della Regia Nave “Italia” nell’America Latina* (Roma: De Luca, 1999).



Figure 4. Pieretto Bianco, *Sailors unloading the goods*, in Saverio Kambo, “Cronache romane. La prima mostra d’arte marinara,” *Emporium* LXIV, no. 384 (1926): 391.

Nevertheless, the discourse on Pieretto Bianco is more significant for this analysis. Bianco never was a symbolist painter like Sartorio was, if anything a landscape painter who created lightful and vibrant elegies observing reality. Anyway, the realistic residues were totally eliminated at the exhibition, because the exhibition itself aspired to no descriptive narrative of the sea. The adaptation in eight canvases of the venetian cycle satisfied the promoters of the initiative so much so that the artist was involved in the decoration of the Marina Palace. Its architect, Giulio Magni, actually proposed the acquisition of the eight canvases for the walls of the ministerial building, but it never happened. The palace for the Ministry of the Navy landed into Mussolini’s supervision directly from the Giolittian pre-war governments, with its load of allegories and mythologies, academic resonances and nineteenth-century baroqueism.²⁸ The murals were waving between D’Annunzian emphasis and a

vague late-symbolist languor, but they all entered in fascist imaginary. The dense plan of political and moralizing echoes was explained first by Morolli, who didn’t fail to underline the persistent rhetorical meanings hidden in Roman bows and feluccas seen in the scene of the Greek genius captured by the conquerors, in the many images of non-existent coasts recaptured and made “ours” through the repopulation of ancient or antique-effect symbols. Inside this monumental palace, it was unified the “southern secessionist spirit” of the building with the self-extolling prerogatives of the black-shirted mythology.²⁹ One of the most famous scenes of the pictorial cycle, crowning the access staircase, was a now canonical *Rome-Athena* triumphing over the sea, with a large anchor in the foreground; along the walls, an eclectic frieze remembered the sempiternal beauty of all the Italian seas, namely the Mediterranean, Ionian, and Adriatic Seas, with allegories of the marine cities as voluptuous women

²⁸ Luca Quattrocchi, “Arma la prora e salpa verso il mondo: le decorazioni pittoriche del Ministero della Marina,” *La Diana* 1, no 1 (1997): 315–327.

²⁹ Gabriele Morolli, “Il Ministero della Marina,” *I Palazzi della Difesa*, ed., Franco Borsi and Gabriele Morolli, (Roma: Editalia, 1985), 155–157.

and a huge recourse to official liberty formulary. In the palace, Bianco was less didactic and pompous than his colleagues, filtering the insidious concept that the sea belongs to those who work hard for it. He disclosed the brave and mystic fatigue of marine workers in a boardroom, very similar to the exhibition environment: the idea of *Mare nostrum* ended up including and empowering other myths, such as that of the individual commitment and physical sacrifice to the construction of a prosperous and revived golden age. We also remember that both the words “building” and “sailing” appeared in large letters in the Bianco’s frescos, offering the framework to moral prescriptions. Incredibly connected to the exhibition, the Marina Palace was a programmatic project intended to prove the non-factual but ontological dominion over the *Mare nostrum* and the numerous declinations that the theme assumed over the year. Because of his peculiar interpretation of Italian marine spirit and hardship, Bianco was counted in the jury of the second *Marine Art Exhibition* (1927–1928), receiving the task of supervising the entire scenography of the exhibition and, in particular, organizing the anthologies of some rooms: the artist who most understood the subtended meanings of marine iconography confirmed himself the most excellent “seafaring” artist.

During the second edition of the initiative, which was organized immediately after the first, the political vocation became even more palpable, under the motto « Italia will be seafaring, or not will be! », at the honorary presidency of Mussolini. The set-up aspects were much more cared for and there also was a spread of references to past wars, military confrontations, and the laical holiness of the Sea. The poster of the exhibition did not allow for misunderstandings: while the illustrative and frivolous references to the marine world disappeared, a large fascio on which the flame of courage burned stood out among the waves. In addition to the historical and documentary section, which included many photographs of ports and hydraulic works, testimonies of all the successes related to navigation and naval clashes, models of vessels and boats, an heterogeneous section of material dedicated to the city of Fiume, with proclamations, newspaper

clippings, posters, and memories of the D’Annunzian occupation revealed the multi-media nature of this not-only-art exhibition. A room was connoted by the insertion of some *ex voto*, implementing the idea of sacrality around the marine aspects.

The celebrative intentions were demonstrated with the engagement of Alessandro Limongelli (1890–1932) as exhibition designer. The architect invented for the Main Gallery an ephemeral roman aqueduct, a calibrated series of arches that recalls the *Novecento* movement, De Chirico’s classical inserts and the Sironi’s restless classicism, disclosing a particular interpretation over the seawater world, fixed and *sine tempore*.³⁰ Limongelli predilected the minimization of structure and decorations, although the research for ancient evocation remained intact. At this point, we can underline that the ancient arch became a multiform prototype for anyone who approached the narrative of Italian marine rebirth. (Fig. 5)

In those months Limongelli was working on the other side of the Mediterranean Sea as ephemeral compositor, creating a sort of linguistic neo-roman “*koine*”. The *doppelgänger* of an ideal and modern Rome was totally exported in the annexed territories as well as it was fomented at home. In occasion of the King’s entrance in Tripoli, in 1928, the architect reshaped a visionary ephemeral triumphal arch to be placed on Tripoli’s waterfront, an enormous talking object about the Roman re-settlement, very similar to the alienation of Sironi’s sketch, but more magnificent (Figs. 6a–5b). As an enthusiast of classical antiquities and certain of their necessary reinterpretation in present architecture, Limongelli arrived in Libya a year before to collaborate in the temporary construction of a Roman pavilion at the Fair; but it was through the fake arch that he was able to disclose his imagination as a set designer and displayed a desire to restore a direct dialogue with ancient form and temperament. Along the frieze of the arch a long Latin sentence runs— incomprehensible to local people, except in terms

³⁰ On fascist classicism, Simona Storchi, “Latinità, modernità e fascismo nei dibattiti artistici degli anni Venti,” *Cahiers de la Méditerranée*, 95 (2017): 71–83, based on Elena Pontiggia, “L’idea del classico: il dibattito sulla classicità in Italia 1916–1932,” *L’idea del classico*, ed. Elena Pontiggia and Mario Quesada (Milano: Fabbri, 1992), 9–43.

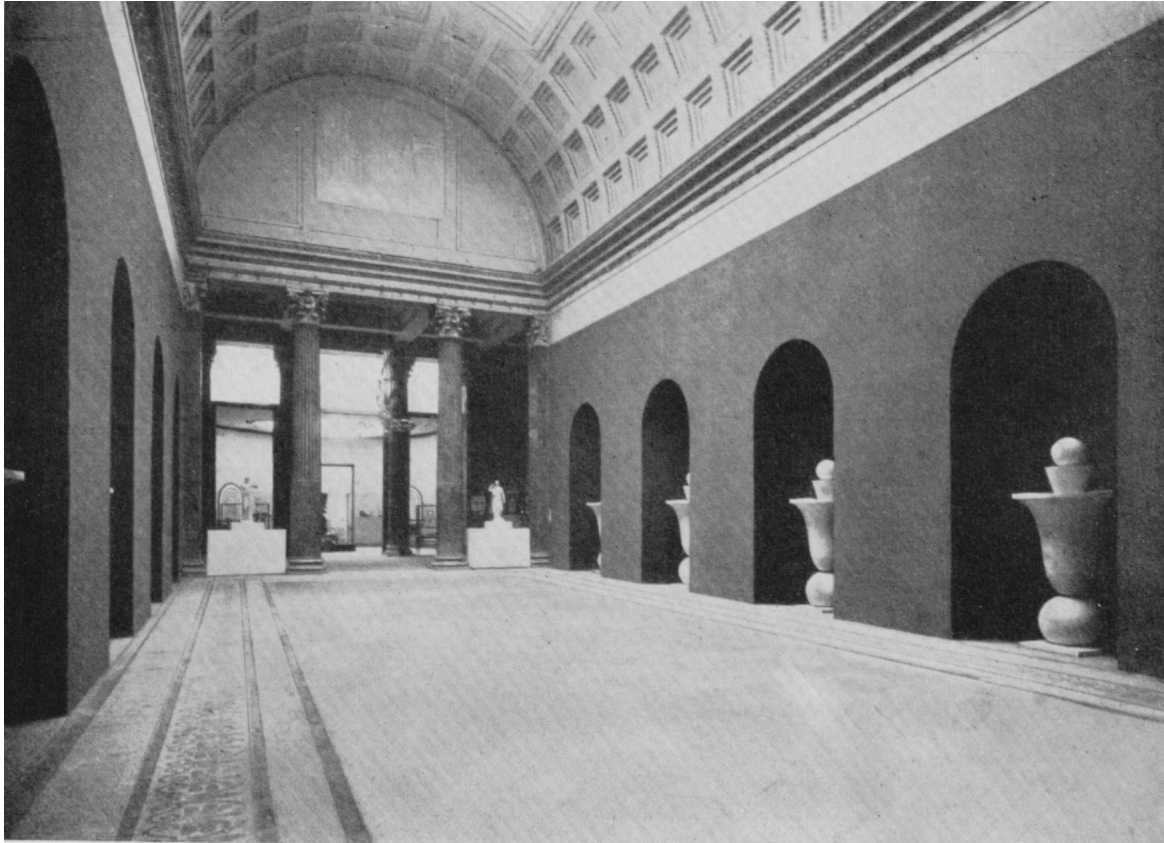


Figure 5. Alessandro Limongelli, *The Main Hall at the second Seafaring Exhibition*, in Roberto Papini, “Cronache romane. La mostra d’arte marinara,” *Emporium* LXVII, no. 398 (1928): 118.

of hyper-communication—celebrating the splendors of the ancient but still present conquerors. Rather than the paraphernalia of palm trees and exotic sphinxes due to the fervid invention of the futurist artist Mario Mirko Vucetich (1898–1975), it was strict columns, with reproductions of the fascio’s wings and boats interlocked that delimited this temporary but extremely condense scene, “cinematographically” in many aspects. The sculptor also realized the big statue dominating the arch: in the position usually occupied by the representation of *Victory*, a kore dressed in peplum faced the sea, with her back to the city, looking to the homeland and protecting the Italian adventure. Vucetich resorted to all his imagination to modernize this type of arch and trapped dissimilar formal worlds in the hard to believe halo of *Mare nostrum*.³¹

³¹ P.M. [Plinio Marconi?], “Arco di Trionfo per la visita delle LL.MM. il Re e la Regina a Tripoli dell’arch. Alessandro Limongelli,” *Architettura e Arti decorative*, VII, fasc. XII (August 1928): 570–572. Cf. also Andrea Speziali, *Mario Mirko Vucetich (1898-1975)*.

The ephemeral environment at the second Marine exhibition offered a more paused and less redundant classicism, documenting a different communicative intention towards those who wanted to feel classic without being obsolete. In Rome, Limongelli couldn’t be a nostalgic eclectic and there was no need to exceed. Here too, it is matter of evocation and ideal connection to the past. Therefore, we can affirm that different Roman echoes were scattered both north and south of the Mediterranean Sea, as an invisible and changing bridge. In 1929, when the Roman pavilion in Tripoli was renovated, the model of ancient triumphal arch was synthesized and monumentalized by Limongelli, who thus became one of the architects who interpreted better the simplifying turning point of the so-called Mediterranean style.³²

Architettura, scultura, pittura, disegno (Cinisello Balsamo: Silvana editoriale, 2020), 149. We wish to thank the author for the help in the research and the pictures of the arch.

³² Stefania Ricci, “Alessandro Limongelli alla Fiera di Tripoli: il Padiglione del Governatore di Roma 1929,” *Storia dell’urbanistica* no 6 (2014): 435–451.



Figure 6a. Alessandro Limongelli, Triumphal ephemeral arch, Tripoli, 1928. Courtesy of Andrea Speziali.

Roberto Papini reviewed the show, identifying the modernity just in the temporary displays. Not with the romantic landscapes but with the ephemeral settings, the Naval League reminded Italians that: “They have to be argonauts, not oysters”. In particular, the critic highlighted the exhibiting space where a waiting room was recreated. In this special environment that simulated a room for the passengers of a seaplane base, we could see modern and functional furniture and some futuristic advertising posters. Under the direction of the rationalist architect Eugenio Faludi, this experimental interlude saved the double soul of Fascism, guardian of tradition on one side and, on the other, visionary.³³

³³ Roberto Papini, “Cronache romane. La mostra d’arte marinara,” *Emporium* LXVII, no. 398 (1928): 118–126.



Figure 6b. Mario Mirko Vucetich, Monumental sculpture for the top of the Tripoline Arch, ca.1928. Courtesy of Andrea Speziali.

On this basis, the seafaring exhibitions displays cannot be investigated without weighting up the widespread propaganda of that period, when many different inputs led the myth to formal shape. The exhibitions programme implanted during the regime permitted a real promotion of some themes, making the most of that concentration, communicative immediacy, and substantial “speed” not allowed to more permanent displays. The spread of *Mare nostrum* found a preferential channel precisely in the printed press and the exhibition settings—on which the present essay intended to focus—which guaranteed a “mediatic” effectiveness similar to modern advertising. The current methodological approach to the study of exhibition practise establishes that, as in any commercial, the non-duration of the events, together with the introduction of some “talking” elements, causes an

extreme engagement of the audience, motivation and conviction.

The “advertising” interest of Fascism on the interiorization of *Mare nostrum* was clearly present even during its first decade, when foreign policy was not entirely aggressive, as we have tried to demonstrate. The myth is not the reality. In the 1920s, both the graphic works and the exhibitions settings, while specific, gave a seductive and constant *réclame* to *Mare nostrum*.

Conclusions of the Myth

The myth was reinforced after the invasion of Ethiopia and the proclamation of the new Empire, of course; when the need for justifications was at the highest level. But, because of the general flattering on emphasized and dogmatic style at the end of the regime, the results were often monotonous and unoriginal. Look for instance at the menacing and masculine sailor of the Genoese Monument (1938), or the majestic fresco in the railway Station of Messina (1941). We might remember also two unavoidable temporary examples at least. Firstly, the *Mostra Augustea della Romanità*.³⁴ In front of a suggestive scenarios composed by a hieratic juxtaposition of graphics, lettering, reconstructions, and plaster casts of ancient work, the glaring persistence of a Roman attitude included unsurprisingly the celebration of the ageless Mediterranean dominion of the peninsula: the exhibition curator, Quirino Giglioli, placed a map of Roman Empire at the death

of Augustus with the *Mare nostrum* in the middle.³⁵ Secondly, the most accomplished celebration of the *Mare nostrum* hosted in 1940 in Naples, was named the *Mostra Triennale delle Terre d’Oltremare*.³⁶ In particular, just next to the entrance of the titanic set of boulevards, fountains, and gardens, before moving between rationalist and monumental pavilions to the sound of exotic music, there was an entire section dedicated to the ancient *Rome over the seas*: Giulio Rosso, documented as architectural decorator, painted an explicit wall panel to codify the identification between the traveller-discoverer Enea, the Roman emperors, and the present masters of the Mediterranean borders.³⁷ The neo-roman “fiction” was amplified on the day of the inauguration, when the drama *Attilio Regolo* was put on stage to thunder against the “new Carthage”, England.

The myth of “*Mare nostrum*” played a significant role in all the steps of the regime. In the first decade, it resulted in more subtle and less self-celebrations than later, completely parted from the colonial wars and devoid of political aggressiveness. It was in the means of propaganda par excellence, such as the press and temporary exhibitions, that the regime multiplied and thickened the utopian idea of “our” sea. The new classical terms reflected its wills. Ironically, the myth of the *Mare nostrum* will find a last vivid use in the images produced by the “enemies”, when all the *clichés* on fascist ambition were put upside-down to make fun of the collapsing “papier-mâché Cesar”.

³⁴ As essential bibliography, cf. Marco Rinaldi, “La Mostra Augustea della Romanità (1937–1938): architettura, scenografia e propaganda in alcuni progetti inediti di allestimento”, *Ricerche di storia dell’arte* no 63 (1997): 91–108; Gabriella Prisco, “Fascismo di gesso. Dietro le quinte della Mostra Augustea della Romanità”, in Maria Ida Catalano ed., *Snodi di critica. Musei, mostre, restauro e diagnostica artistica in Italia (1930-1940)* (Roma: Gangemi, 2013): pp. 225–259; Joshua Arthurs, “Bathing in the spirit of eternal Rome: the Mostra Augustea della Romanità”, in *Brill’s companion to the classics, fascist Italy and Nazi Germany* no 12 (2018): 157–177.

³⁵ Giulio Quirino Giglioli, “La mostra augustea della romanità”, *Emporium* no 513 (1937): 499–504.

³⁶ Gianni Dore, “Ideologia coloniale e senso comune etnografico nella Mostra delle Terre Italiane d’Oltremare”, in N. Labanca ed., *L’Africa in vetrina. Storie di musei e di esposizioni coloniali in Italia* (Treviso: PAGVS Editore, 1992): 47–65; Giovanni Arena, *Napoli 1940-1952. Dalla prima Mostra Triennale delle terre italiane d’Oltremare alla prima Mostra Triennale del lavoro italiano nel mondo* (Napoli: Fioranna, 2012); Alessandra Ferlito, *Re-inventare l’italianità: la Triennale delle Terre italiane d’Oltremare di Napoli*, <https://www.roots-routes.org/re-inventare-litalianita-la-triennale-delle-terre-italiane-doltremare-napoli-alessandra-ferlito/>.

³⁷ Anna Dal Pozzo Gaggiotti, Oscar Bacichi, Castello, Carlo Zaghi, Armando Cepollaro Vincenzo Costantini, “Prima Mostra delle Terre Italiane d’Oltremare”, *Emporium* no 548 (1940): 56–103.