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Mediterranizing Gauguin. Giuseppe Biasi's Africa and Sardinia

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Abstract

Looking at the North-African stay of the artist Giuseppe Biasi (1885–1945), the paper deals with a brand of Mediterraneism marked by issues of national and regional identity. A key figure of the regionalist movement in his native Sardinia, in Egypt Biasi sympathized with the painters Mukhtar and Said's nationalist ideals. Back in Italy, his works showed a conflation of the African and Sardinian worlds, implicitly confirming the theories of the anthropologist Giuseppe Sergi about the Italians as Mediterranean race and contributing to spread the fascist notion of a mediterraneism aimed at justifying colonialism.

Résumé

À partir du séjour nord-africain du peintre Giuseppe Biasi (1885-1945), cet essai traite d'un type de Méditerranisme marqué par des questions d'identité nationale et régionale. Protagoniste du mouvement régionaliste en Sardaigne, en Egypte Biasi sympathisa avec l'idéal national des peintres Mukhtar et Said. À son retour en Italie, il identifia dans son oeuvre les mondes Africain et Sarde, en confirmant les théories anthropologiques de Giuseppe Sergi des Italiens comme race méditerranéenne et en contribuant à répandre la notion fasciste d'un méditerranisme visant à justifier le colonialisme.

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"I will leave this wonderful city in a fortnight. I'm getting crazy in this Egyptian Museum. The more one goes there, the more one is caught. And I don't give a damn for museums – but I could live here!"¹

This declaration of love for the ancient art of Egypt comes from the Sardinian artist, Giuseppe Biasi (Sassari, 1885 – Andorno Micca, 1945), writing from Cairo in 1926. Biasi's four-year stay in North Africa was crucial for his development as a painter, leading him to add to his repertory of scenes from his native island an equally rich series of Orientalist themes. Both these thematic streams centered on the construction of "otherness" as the basis of a process of identity formation, and over time they came to overlap, in a play of dynamic relations that makes Biasi's work an interesting case study.²

In the 1910s Biasi was involved in the regionalist movement aimed at promoting a cultural and social "renaissance" of Sardinia, an island that—perhaps more than the rest of Southern Italy—was treated by the post-unitary Italian State as a sort of sub-colonial domain.³ The cultural "awakening" of the region had been initiated by a circle of intellectuals gathered around the writer Grazia Deledda (1871–1936), whose novels, later awarded with the Nobel Prize, threw a poetic and exotic light on the life of Sardinian shepherds.⁴

Biasi started to gain national renown as the illustrator of Deledda's books, and at the same time developed a corpus of painting representing peasant costumes and rural life. His work, exhibited in the Roman Secession and the Venice Biennial, met good success, especially after the painter's relocation to Milan in 1915.⁵ Then, from 1924 to 1927, Biasi

traveled in North Africa, where he transformed his style and came to envisage a more complex way of dealing with the issue of identity.

In Biasi's early work, painted in a decorative style influenced by Klimt and the Vienna secession, rural Sardinia appears as a pastoral Eden. (Fig. 1) This image, of course, was very far from reality: the island was at the time one of the most backward regions in Europe, plagued by malaria and famine, ridden with bandits and subjected to fierce State repressions of brigandage which targeted, besides the brigands, the local population⁶

To better understand Biasi's work, we should consider the view of Sardinia then current in mainland Italy. Recent studies have dispelled the myth of the "Italiani brava gente", kind, tolerant, and alien from racist feelings.⁷ Racist prejudices played in fact a big role in the cultural unification of the country after 1861.⁸ The last decades of the century saw a process of racialization of the Southern Italians, recently characterized as "internal Orientalism".⁹ Anthropologists described Italy as split in two: a progressive, civilized North was pitted against a primitive South, whose backwardness was imputed to the supposed biological inferiority of its inhabitants.¹⁰ The inhabitants of Sardinia—this most peripheral among the peripheral regions of Italy—were construed by anthropologists as atavistic criminals, naturally prone to delinquency.¹¹

the Rome Secession of 1913, 1914 and 1915, and in the Venice Biennale of 1909, 1914, 1920 (and again in 1928, 1930, 1936).

⁶ Girolamo Sotgiu, *Storia della Sardegna dalla Grande Guerra al Fascismo* (Bari: Laterza, 1990), and *Storia della Sardegna durante il Fascismo* (Bari: Laterza, 1995); Luciano Marrocu et al., eds, *La Sardegna contemporanea. Idee, luoghi, processi culturali* (Rome: Donzelli, 2015).

⁷ Angelo del Boca, *Italiani, brava gente? Un mito duro a morire* (Vicenza: Neri Pozza, 2005); Claudio Fogu, "Italiani brava gente. The legacy of fascist historical culture on Italian politics of memory", in *The Politics of Memory in Postwar Europe*, Richard Ned Lebow, Wulf Kansteiner, and Claudio Fogu, eds (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2006), 147–176.

⁸ Alberto Burgio, ed., *Nel nome della razza. Il razzismo nella storia d'Italia. 1870–1945* (Bologna: Il Mulino, 1999); Aliza S. Wong, *Race and Nation in Liberal Italy, 1861–1911. Meridionalism, Empire, and Diaspora* (New York-Houndmills, Basingstoke, Hapshire, England: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006).

⁹ Jane Schneider, ed., *Italy's Southern question: Orientalism in one country* (Oxford: Berg, 1998); Nelson Moe, "This is Africa: Ruling and representing Southern Italy, 1860–1861", in *Making and Re-making Italy. The Cultivation of the National Identity around the Risorgimento*, eds Albert Russell Ascoli and Krystyna von Henneberg (Oxford and New York: Berg, 2001), 119–153.

¹⁰ Rodolfo Livi, "La distribuzione dei caratteri antropologici in Italia", *Rivista Italiana di Sociologia*, II, IV (1898); Alfredo Niceforo, *L'Italia barbara contemporanea* (Milan: Sandron, 1898).

¹¹ The idea of Sardinians as "delinquent race" was popularized by Alfredo Niceforo, *La delinquenza in Sardegna. Note di sociologia criminale* (Palermo: Sandron, 1897). A heated polemic was initiated by the publication of Giulio Bechi, *Caccia grossa. Scene*

¹ Unless otherwise indicated, translations are mine. Giuseppe Biasi to Alessandro Pandolfi, Cairo, January 14, 1926. Pandolfi Archive, Gallarate (Milan), henceforth quoted as PA.

² See Giuliana Altea and Marco Magnani, *Giuseppe Biasi* (Nuoro: Ilisso, 1998) for an extended bibliography.

³ The idea of the "colonial" status of Sardinia at the turn of the 19th century, advanced since the 1990s by novelists such as Sergio Atzeni and Marcello Fois, has been discussed by Brigit Wagner, "La questione sarda. La sfida dell'alterità", *aut-aut*, no. 349 (January–March 2011), 10–29.

⁴ Nicola Tanda, *Dal «mito dell'isola» all'«isola del mito»*. Deledda e dintorni (Rome: Bulzoni, 1992).

⁵ The artist's debut at the Mostra Sarda in Milan (1917) was well received by leading Italian critics such as Margherita Sarfatti ("Battaglie d'arte. La Mostra sarda inaugurata a Milano", *Il Mondo*, III, no. 22 (June 3, 1917), 8) and Vittorio Pica ("Tre giovani artisti della Sardegna", *Emporium*, XLVI, no. 271 (July 1917), 3–17. Biasi exhibited in



Figure 1. Giuseppe Biasi, *The Parrot's Song*, 1916. Tempera on cardboard, cm 123,5 x 128. Como, private collection. Courtesy Ilisso Publishing, Nuoro.

While implicitly negating these stereotypes, Biasi's paintings reflected the attitude of the Sardinian bourgeoisie, who appropriated the primitivized image of Sardinian peasants, making it into a symbol of identity to be sent back to the Italians,¹² in a typical example of what Mary Louise Pratt calls the "mirror dance" between dominants and dominees,

e figure del banditismo sardo, (Milan: Treves, 1900): the author, a participant in the 1899 State expedition against Sardinian bandits, reported his experience in crudely racist terms.

¹² See Susanna Paulis, *La costruzione dell'identità: per un'analisi antropologica della narrativa in Sardegna fra '800 e '900* (Cagliari: EDES, 2006).

rulers and the ruled.¹³ In early 20th century Sardinia we find mechanisms similar to those at play in the colonial countries; only, while the colonial Other is seen by Western culture as both seducing and threatening, in Sardinia the vernacular Other was outright idealized by the local bourgeoisie, within an identity project aimed at building a "national" conscience as well as at rehabilitating the island in the eyes of the Italians. To accomplish this project,

¹³ Mary Louise Pratt, *Imperial Eyes: Travel Writing and Transculturation* (London: Routledge, 1992).

Biasi—a traveler in his own country—aesthetized Sardinian peasant life, making it into an exotic spectacle.

When regionalist and decorative painting began to appear outdated in front of the emerging fascist aspiration to a national, classicist art,¹⁴ Biasi decided to leave Italy in search of new sources of inspiration. In 1924 he went to the Italian colonies of Libya, and then to Egypt, where he sojourned in Alexandria and Cairo, but also travelled in the rest of the country, down to Sudan.¹⁵ His African experience, belated in comparison to the main wave of 19th century Orientalist travels, sets him apart from the painterly expeditions funded in the 1930s by the fascist regime with the aim of providing artists to decorate the new colonial buildings and to document colonial life.¹⁶

Biasi brought to Africa the legacy of European primitivism, whose forefather was Gauguin; as he wrote in his notebooks, he wanted to create something like a “mediterraneanized Gauguin”.¹⁷ He meant to bring Gauguin’s vision of the primitive to the Near East, grafting it into the cultural tradition which from Nerval to Flaubert, from Gautier to Barrès, had turned North Africa into the fascinating counterpart of modernity. Like the 19th century Orientalists before him, Biasi was seduced by Egypt’s associations with biblical and classical antiquity, by its being the point of confluence of some among the most important world’s religions, by the aura of transgressive sensuality that surrounded it.

In Egypt Biasi concentrated on a few subjects: landscape, dance and music, the nude. His method of work moved from a “field observation”, achieved through photos and sketches, to the selection of a group of compositions to be subsequently worked

and reworked in countless variations. His pen and tempera sketches, the most experimental part of his work, are essential to his project of mediterraneanizing Gauguin. Like Gauguin had combined all sort of Western and Eastern sources, so Biasi used many “primitive” and primitivist references to create his imaginary Egypt. (Fig.2)

His drawings mix elements from Indonesian sculpture, Peruvian ceramics, Mongolian bronzes, African masks, with recollections of the European modernist tradition from Manet to Modigliani, Matisse, and the German Expressionists.¹⁸ The art of ancient Egypt plays a significant role: “Between Egyptian art and Indian art, whose long wave is arriving here, I had a powerful washing”, Biasi wrote to an artist friend in 1926.¹⁹

He had been especially impressed by the recent Tutankamun findings in the National Museum in Cairo: “the last things of Tout-en-Kamon are such a splendour! (...) The museum has been an incredible source of inspiration.”²⁰

Classical antiquity was an important source too, and not just on the iconographic level. In his paintings, realistic motives turn into mythological fantasy, giving shape to an ironic black Olympus, inhabited by goddesses, nymphs and centaurs. Needless to say, by presenting Mediterranean Africa as the place where the great world cultures merge, Biasi at the same time ennobled and derogated it. He implicitly infantilized Mediterranean peoples, positing them as representatives of a civilization that had stopped at an early stage of development, to be later completed by the Occident.

Biasi’s quest for origin was both an attempt to reinvent himself and, like for other modernist artists, “a device for the exposure of desires”.²¹ In a country which—like all of the imagined “Orient”—appeared as the appropriate place for sexual encounters that were impossible in Europe, Biasi coupled the return to the 20th century art’s sources with the

¹⁴ On the classicist tendencies in the Italian art of the early 1920s will be sufficient to mention here Elizabeth Cowling and Jennifer Mundy, *On Classic Ground* (London: Tate, 1990); Elena Pontiggia and Mario Quesada, *L’idea del classico. Temi classici nell’arte italiana 1916-1932* (Milan: Fabbri, 1992).

¹⁵ Biasi’s movements in North Africa can be traced thanks to his correspondence with the ceramicist Alessandro Pandolfi, in Altea and Magnani, *Giuseppe Biasi*, 334–336.

¹⁶ On Italian artists in Libya, see Serena Radaelli, “Artisti italiani in Libia nei secondi anni Trenta”, in *Novecento. Arte e vita in Italia tra le due guerre*, ed. Fernando Mazzocca (Milan: Silvana, 2013), 392–395; Lucio Scardino, “L’officina ferrarese in Libia: Funi e gli altri”, in *Architettura italiana d’oltremare 1870-1940*, eds Giuliano Gresleri, Piergiorgio Massaretti, and Stefano Zagnoni (Venice: Marsilio, 1993), 289–301; Maria Paola Dettori et al., *Artisti sardi e Orientalismo. Altri esotismi* (Milan: Silvana, 2017).

¹⁷ Giuseppe Biasi, unpublished notebook, “Bellagio – Appunti” (ca. 1923–1927), Fondazione di Sardegna Collection, Sassari.

¹⁸ Altea and Magnani, *Giuseppe Biasi*, 175–189.

¹⁹ Biasi to Pandolfi, Alexandria, summer 1926, PA.

²⁰ Biasi to Pandolfi, Cairo, January 14, 1926, PA.

²¹ Robert Burden, *Travel, Modernism and Modernity* (London: Routledge, 2015), 18.



Figure 2. Giuseppe Biasi, *Women at the river*, 1925-1927. Tempera on paper, cm 15 x 17,5. Collection of the Regione Autonoma della Sardegna, Sassari. Courtesy Ilisso Publishing, Nuoro.

invention of a thematic repertory with strong erotic connotations.

The nude was a new subject for him. Although his Sardinian women had been subtly charged with sensuality, their function in the crystallization of positive identity values prevented the artist from representing them in openly erotic terms. In Mediterranean Africa he felt free to stage the desire that he had previously only hinted at, by adding of a further dimension of alterity to that of sex and class: race. Back to Italy, Biasi was to give up the sensual implications of his Sardinian subjects, choosing instead to concentrate on Egyptian paintings his erotic phantoms.

The nudes should be located in their proper context. Given the well-known difficulties met by Western painters in finding female models in Islamic countries, the only available choices were often prostitutes.²² Made indispensable by practical reasons, the use of prostitutes was in keeping with the tendency of Western culture not only to incorporate the sign of a disturbing black sexuality to the image of the white courtesan, but also to identify the “primitive” and the prostitute.²³

²² See Barbara Harlow, “Introduction”, in Malek Alloula, *The Colonial Harem* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1987): XX.

²³ Hal Foster, “Primitive scenes”, in *Prosthetic Gods* (Cambridge, Mass.– London: The MIT Press, 2004), 12-14.



Figure 3. Giuseppe Biasi, *In the morning*, 1927. Oil on canvas, cm 110 x 135. Cagliari, private collection. Courtesy Ilisso Publishing, Nuoro.

A few realistic studies deal frankly with this context. However, for Biasi realism was no more than a side issue. His notebooks abound with incitements to himself “to caricature – to stylize”,²⁴ put into practice above all in the drawings and small gouaches, where he adopted a simplified and often expressionistically deformed style. In comparison, the larger oils seem decidedly tamer, and closer to the Déco artistic climate. (Fig.3)

It goes without saying that the lack of a narrative context in many of the nudes was automatically filled up by the spectator (implicitly male and Western), habituated to locate such representations

within the orientalist setting of the harem. In the same way, Biasi’s scenes of bathing or rest in the oasis—however improbable in reality—were read as natural manifestations of free and wild costumes. The topoi of the orientalist iconography (the black slave and the white favorite, bathing, the dance, the long leisure hours), decontextualized according to the project of mediterraneanizing Gauguin, triggered a series of associations in the viewers’ mind. All the women portrayed ended with appearing as “odalisques”, a category as vague as full of sexual innuendos, which the painter approached through the filter of Ingres and Matisse.

How was this production received in Egypt? Biasi’s stay coincided with the height of the fortunes of al-Nahda, the Egyptian nationalist movement that in

²⁴ Biasi, unpublished notebook.



Figure 4. Mahmoud Mukhtar, *The Renaissance of Egypt*, 1919–1928. Granite. Cairo University Gate. From Wikipedia (image in the Commons).

1924 had brought to power the Wafd party led by Saad Zaghlul. Al-Nahda was seconded on the cultural level by the search for an artistic awakening of the country led by such artists as the sculptor, Mahmoud Mokhtar and the painters, Mahmoud Said and Muhammad Nagy.²⁵ Based on the idea of a continuity

between ancient and modern Egypt, only temporarily interrupted by Islam, Al-Nahda's ideology prompted a return to figurative art, in contrast to the tradition of Islamic aniconism. The movement had its visual symbol in a combination of motives from Pharaonic art and Egyptian rural life—especially the figure of the fellaha, the peasant woman—, epitomized by Mokhtar's celebrated monument *The renaissance of Egypt*, then about to be completed.²⁶ (Fig.4)

²⁵ See Liliane Karnouk, *Modern Egyptian Art. The Emergency a National Style* (Cairo: American University in Cairo Press, 1988); Caroline Williams, "Twentieth-Century Egyptian Art: The Pioneers, 1920–1922", in *Re-envisioning Egypt, 1919–1952*, eds Arthur Goldschmidt, Amy J. Johnson, Barak A. Salmoni (Cairo and New York: American University in Cairo Press, 2005), 426–447; and especially Patrick Kane, *The politics of art in modern Egypt Aesthetics, ideology and nation-building* (London-New York: B. Tauris, 2013).

²⁶ On Mokhtar, see Alexandra Dika Saggerman, "Mahmoud Mukhtar: 'The First sculptor from the land of sculpture'", *World Art*, 4, No.1 (2014), 27–46.

To a painter who had set up to foster the “renaissance” of his native island through the representation of rural themes, the nationalistic agenda of Mokhtar and his colleagues must have resounded with familiar echoes. That Biasi established good relationships with these artists (some of whom had studied in Italy and/or had been influenced by Italian art)²⁷ is demonstrated by his participation, in February 1927, in the founding exhibition of the Chimera group, gathered around Mokhtar with large backing from the intellectual class.²⁸ The cosmopolitan character of the show reflected the openness of the Chimera group to Western culture, whose contribution wasn’t seen in contradiction to the reviving of the pharaonic inheritance in the present.

The exhibition—a significant event in modern Egypt’s art history²⁹—had a semi-official profile: supported by the president of the Senate, Hussein Rachdi, and by the vice-president of the chamber of Deputies Wissa Wassef, was attended by writers and journalists who belonged to the Society of Friends of the Chimera, organized by Husayn Haykal, editor of the liberal journal *Al Siyasa*, and by several ladies engaged in the fight for women rights.³⁰

Biasi’s participation attracted the attention of the press; in *Al Ahram*, the most important Egyptian daily, he was given the same space than the two leading figures of the national art scene, Mokhtar and Said.³¹ (Fig. 5)

Biasi’s work must have appealed to the Egyptian public for its knowing fusion of cultural traditions, Western and Eastern, ancient and modern. As we have seen, Pharaonic art, crucial to the local nationalist movement, was also important to Biasi’s construction of an imaginary Egypt. Whereas

Orientalism sought to separate ancient Egypt from modern Egyptians, al-Nahda wanted to reunite them; Biasi in turn provided a fantastic image of Egypt in which past and present merged. Mokhtar and his friends tried to emphasize over Egypt’s Muslim identity its links with the Mediterranean countries from which Western civilization originated; similarly, Biasi’s vision of Egypt, filtered through a mosaic of figurative references, was suggestive of the idea of a palimpsest of cultures.

The fact that Biasi’s repertory of subjects included the figure of the fellaha, so dear to the members of the Chimera group, further confirms this convergence. A comparison between Said’s *From the river*, a painting exhibited in the 1927 show and reproduced in *El Ahram*,³² and a study by Biasi of a *Woman carrying a jug of water* (Cagliari, Collection of the Regione Sardegna) show a close similarity. In short, Biasi’s works had several points of contact with Egyptian nationalist and anti-colonialist art, notwithstanding their obvious connections to the orientalist tradition and the orientalist discourse.

The Egyptian stay was to mark the artist’s subsequent development. Back in Italy by the end of 1927, he resumed his Sardinian subjects, bringing to them not just the discovery of “African light”—that quintessential moment of Orientalist experience—but some characters of the human and natural African environment. In landscape paintings, he emphasized the aspect of arcane, oppressing solitude he had observed in the Egyptian countryside, and simplified the volumes of Sardinian peasant houses, stressing the resemblance to Arab architectures. In the figure scenes, he gave to Sardinian people physical traits of the North African population. Sardinian shepherds became as brown as Egyptians, and the image of the fellaha tended to coincide with that of the similarly veiled Sardinian peasant woman. (Fig. 6)

One might be inclined to see in this conflation of two worlds a proof of openness and cross-cultural dialogue. However, its meaning shifts when we consider it in relation to the socio-cultural conditions

²⁷ Before joining in 1920 the Académie Julian in Paris, Said studied in Alexandria with Amelia Casonato da Forno and later with Arturo Zanieri, both graduated from the Art Academy in Florence. See Valérie Hess, “Mahmoud Saïd”, in *Contemporary Practices. Art from the Middle East*, vol. XII, 79 (<http://www.contemporarypractices.net/essays/volumeXII/mahmoudsa%C3%AEd.pdf>), and the catalogue raisonné by Valérie Didier Hess and Hussam Rashwan, *Mahmoud Saïd* (Milan: Skira, 2017). Muhammad Nagy also studied in the Art Academy in Florence from 1910 to 1914.

²⁸ See “Il primo salone egiziano Chimera”, *L’Imparziale*, February 23, 1927.

²⁹ Karnouk, *Modern Egyptian Art*, 8. Unfortunately, Karnouk’s book lacks a philological apparatus; more in general, the early phase of Egyptian modernism has yet to be studied in detail.

³⁰ Karnouk, *Modern Egyptian Art*, 8.

³¹ “Some of the paintings exhibited in the show of the Chimera Group, which opened yesterday in Antikhana Street, Cairo”, *El Ahram*, February 27, 1927.

³² “Some of the paintings”.



Figure 5. Page from *El Ahrām*, March 1927, showing paintings by Biazi (center and lower right), Said (lower centre and left) and sculptures by Mukhtar (upper left and right). Press clipping from the Biazi Archive, Capena (Rome). Courtesy Ilisso Publishing, Nuoro.

of early Twentieth century Italy. In the context of a widespread tendency to “otherize” the South of Italy,³³ Southerners were depicted as akin to Africans

and, like them, indolent, promiscuous, barbaric, and aggressive.³⁴ Then, from 1911 on, with the outburst of the Libyan war, the notion of a debased

³³ The concept of “othering” was introduced by Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, who started using it systematically in “The Rani of Sirmur: an essay in reading the archives”, *History and Theory*, 24, no. 3 (1985), 247–272.

³⁴ Vito Teti, *La razza maledetta. Le origini del pregiudizio antimeridionale*, Manifestolibri, Milan, 2011; Antonino de Francesco, *La palla al piede. Una storia del pregiudizio antimeridionale* (Milan: Feltrinelli, 2012).

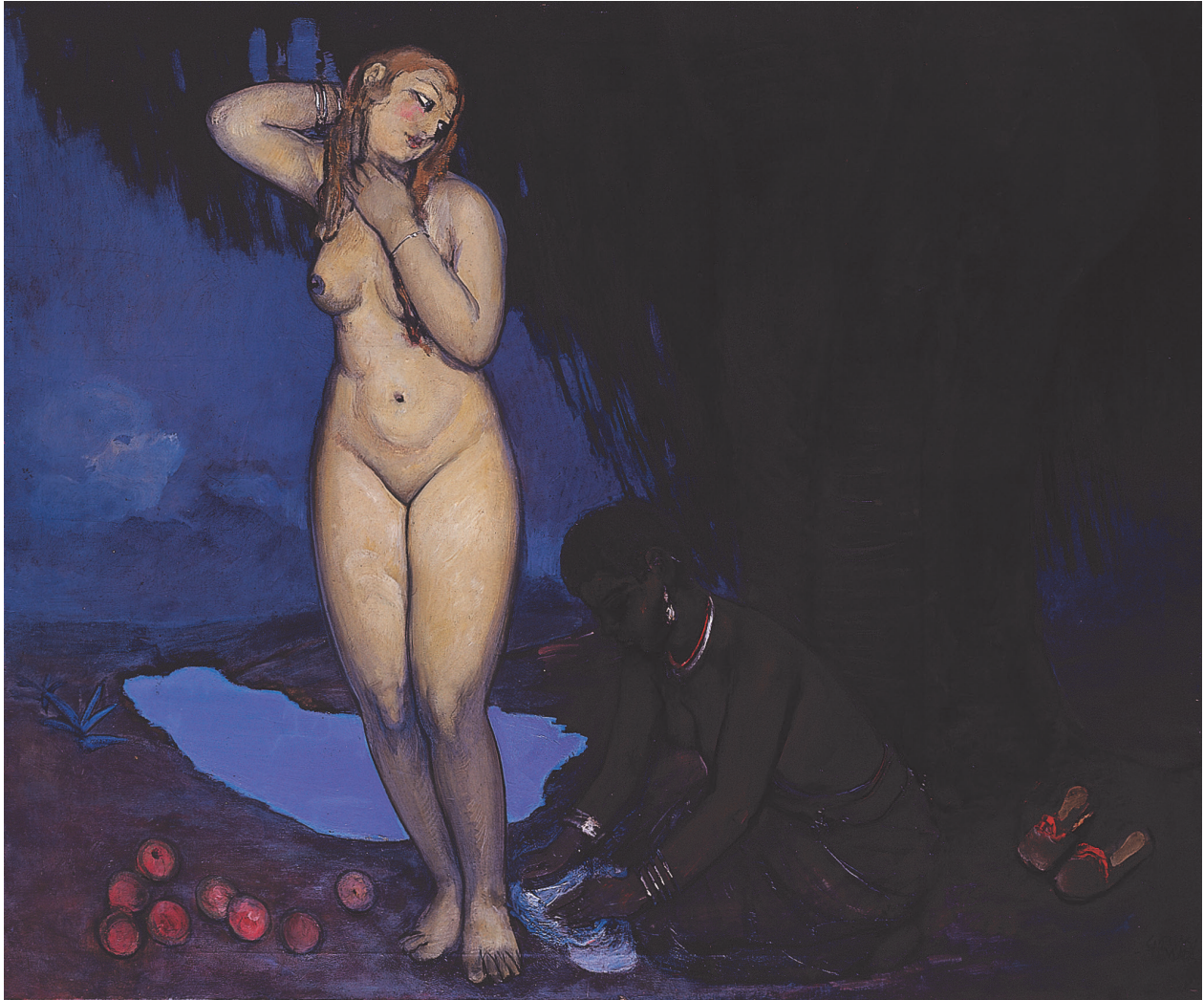


Figure 6. Giuseppe Biasi, *At the fountain*, 1927–1928. Oil on canvas, cm 70,5 x 105. Sassari, private collection. Courtesy Ilisso Publishing, Nuoro.

alterity was displaced from the inside to the outside of the nation: by setting Italians—all Italians, Northern and Southern, men and women, from all social strata—against the African Other, it became possible to build an Italian national identity, overcoming the historical differences which divided the country. According to one of the fathers of Italian anthropology, Giuseppe Sergi, while the inhabitants of Southern Italy were of Eurafrian descent, the totality of Italians were a Mediterranean race, unified by the fusion of nationalities operated by the Roman Empire.³⁵ This imaginary construction of an Italic “race” under the umbrella of mediterraneity

allowed to heal the divisions between internal racialized groups.³⁶

Before the emanation of the racial colonial laws of 1936–1937 and the subsequent “Aryanist turn” of 1938, the fascist regime gave a strong contribution to this process, popularizing the notion of a “mediterraneism” aimed at justifying colonialism.³⁷ In the light of the appeal to the myth of the Roman *Mare Nostrum*, of Italy’s civilizing mission

³⁵ Giuseppe Sergi, *Italia. Le origini* (Turin: Bocca, 1919). See Fedra A. Pizzato, “Per una storia antropologica della nazione. Mito mediterraneo e costruzione nazionale in Giuseppe Sergi (1880–1919)”, *Storia del pensiero politico* 1 (January–April 2015), 25–52.

³⁶ Lucia Re, “Italians and the invention of race: the Poetics and Politics of Difference in the Struggle over Libya, 1890–1913”, *California Italian Studies*, 1, no. 1 (2010), 1–58.

³⁷ The Fascist regime’s “Aryanist turn” was set forth by the publication of the *Manifesto of Racial Scientists* in 1938. See Francesco Cassata, *“La Difesa della razza”. Politica, ideologia e immagine del razzismo fascista*, Einaudi, Torino 2008. For the distinction between the regime’s position on race before and after 1936, see Gaia Giuliani, *Race, Nation and Gender in Modern Italy. Intersectional Representations in Visual Culture* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2018).

and of North Africa as a Promised Land, fascist racial theoreticians appropriated Sergi's notion of the African descent of the Italians; in the name of this pretended common origin, they tried to present the latter as "natural rulers" of the North Africans.³⁸ Italian colonialism was imagined as a settler colonialism, aimed at expanding the nation beyond its borders;³⁹ within this colonial model, Italians, being akin to Africans and at the same time more developed culturally and intellectually, were supposed to help them on the path of civilization.

These assumptions had ample currency in Sardinia. Grazia Deledda had emphasized in her novels the proximity of the island to North-African primitiveness, and in her autobiographical book *Cosima* even described herself as having "Lybian" physical traits.⁴⁰ Literature, propaganda and scientific discourse went hand in hand in stressing the affinity of the two peoples. "The historian can easily find a kinship between Sardinians and Africans—wrote in 1928 the newspaper *L'Unione Sarda*, in an article intended to promote the colonial "mission" of Sardinia—through the common subjection to the ancient Phoenicians (. . .), to Carthaginians, to Romans. The zoologist will find in Sardinia Arab horses, and finally the anthropologist and the specialist in anthropometry will find similar skulls, similar statues".⁴¹ Four years later, Luigi Castaldi, head of the Anatomical Institute of Cagliari, in his inaugural address for the academic year 1932–1933, echoed Giuseppe Sergi in stating that Sardinian people belonged to the "Eurafrican Mediterranean race", doing his best to conciliate the island's legacy of centuries of racial mixing with a pretended character of "purity", to be found especially in the population of the Campidano area.⁴²

³⁸ On the alleged proximity between Italians and North African peoples, and its use in the fascist propaganda, see Valeria Deplano, *L'Africa in casa. Propaganda e cultura coloniale nell'Italia fascista* (Florence-Milan: Le Monnier-Mondadori, 2015).

³⁹ See Patrick Wolfe, *Settler Colonialism and the Transformation of Anthropology: the Politics and Poetics of an Ethnographic Event* (London: Cassell, 1999). On the debate on the notion of "settler colonialism", see Lorenzo Veracini, *Settler colonialism. A Theoretical Overview* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010).

⁴⁰ See Deledda's novel *Cenere*, published in 1903 in *La Nuova Antologia*, where the protagonist attends the lectures of the criminologist Enrico Ferri (author of the preface to Nicosforo's *La delinquenza in Sardegna*).

⁴¹ "Colonia e Sardegna", *L'Unione Sarda*, April 18, 1928.

⁴² Luigi Castaldi, inaugural address for the academic year 1932–1933 at the University of Cagliari, reported in "L'uomo sardo è il rappresentante tipico della pura stirpe mediterranea", *L'Unione Sarda*, November 24, 1932.

So, when Biasi repeatedly identified in his work Sardinian and Arab peasants, Sardinian and Egyptian architecture and landscape, in spite of the sympathy he may have felt for Al-Nahda's nationalist cause, his paintings weren't interpreted by the Italian public as a message of equality between different peoples; more likely, he was seen as contributing to reinforce widespread cultural constructions, in support of the Italian colonial enterprise.

The ambivalence of the painter's position is indirectly signaled by the reception of his new work in Italy. Counting on the recommendation of the Minister of Colonies, Luigi Federzoni, Biasi had hoped to exhibit eleven of his Egyptian nudes in the Venice Biennale of 1928. The Biennale's selection committee, however, turned down the Minister's request, explaining that "the severely artistic profile of the Venetian shows (. . .) doesn't allow propaganda exhibitions, were they the noblest propaganda, like the one that Your Excellence is proposing would certainly be."⁴³ Only two paintings were accepted, and they went almost unnoticed in a show which saw a strong prevalence of the classicist Novecento artists.

Only in 1931 Biasi was able to present a large selection of his African production, at the *I Mostra internazionale d'arte coloniale*, held in Rome in coincidence with the analogous Parisian exhibition of the same year. The Roman show shared the conservative character common to colonial exhibitions;⁴⁴ it was largely deserted by the most important artists, who—as even its jury's report recognized—had been discouraged by the propagandistic character of the event.⁴⁵ The paintings which had been considered inadequate to the higher artistic forum of Venice could be accepted in an exhibition whose first objective was to support the colonial effort.

The eighteen works that Biasi exhibited were generally praised by the critics, who congratulated the painter for abandoning his previous Secessionism and decorativism in favor of a simpler and more

⁴³ Antonio Maraini to Luigi Federzoni, Florence, June 21, 1927, ASAC, Venice, *Scatole Nere* series, no. 44, *Segretario Generale 1928*.

⁴⁴ See Giuliana Tomasella, *Esporre l'Italia coloniale. Interpretazioni dell'alterità* (Padova: Il Poligrafo, 2017).

⁴⁵ "Relazione della giuria", in *Prima Mostra Internazionale d'Arte Coloniale. Catalogo* (Rome: Fratelli Palombi, 1931), 46.

stylized manner.⁴⁶ However, reviewers showed more interest in content than in form. They were quick to identify the nudes in Biasi's canvases as prostitutes in "professional waiting", and even the musicians in the cabaret scenes as "greedy pimps", in articles thick with racist and sexist expressions.⁴⁷ By overlooking the paintings' aesthetic intentions, the critics might be said to have uncovered the subtext hidden under their surface.

Coming to the conclusion, Biasi's case raises a number of interesting issues; some are pretty familiar to the art historians focusing on Orientalism, others are more specific to the artist.

His double experience in Sardinia and North Africa shows the non-unidirectionality of the ideological trajectories between colonizers and colonized, pointing at cultural dynamics much more complex than expected. At first, in Sardinia, Biasi sends back to the sender the primitivist stereotypes on Sardinian people, turning them into a positive image. Then, in Egypt, his exoticized and aestheticized vision of Mediterranean Africa matches the similar representations proposed by the anti-colonial artists linked to Al-Nahda; finally, back in Italy, his overlapping of the North African and the Sardinian world lends itself to be read as justification of colonialist theories of race.

Without a particular enthusiasm for the colonial adventure (his letters contain no more than a passing hint to the on-going fight in occupied Tripolitania),⁴⁸ the painter was imbibed with the most commonplace Western assumptions about Egypt and the Orient. At the same time, his regionalist background made him sensitive to the issues of national independence pursued by the Egyptian artists, who in turn shared with him the idea of Egypt's multiple links to the various Mediterranean traditions at the roots of Western civilization. After the painter's return to Italy, the racist undertones of his work were to shape its critical reception, relegating it in the ghetto of colonial art. This can hardly

surprise us, although, strictly speaking, his painting was born independently from political preoccupations and carried out without any of the finalities associated with the colonial enterprise: as pointed out by Dominique Jarrassé, any work automatically acquires a colonial meaning when framed in an institutional context marked by colonialism.⁴⁹

Biasi's project is intriguing because of its ambivalence and contradictions. North Africa fascinated the artist with its cultural and historic associations and its pictorial suggestions, as the starting point for a pictorial reverie. Was this indifference to precise characterization of local life and people a sign of colonial appropriation of the Other, or simply an effect of the processes of stylization built in the modernist art project? Probably both.

Recent art historical writing focusing on the intersections between Western and non-Western art, while recognizing the importance of Edward Said's theories, has tended to distance itself from his thinking. Several writers lamented the too hasty conflation of Orientalist painting and Said's paradigm of Orientalism, seeing the latter as excessively schematic in its juxtaposition of a dominating West to a victimized East.⁵⁰ In search of a more nuanced perspective, some scholars have turned to the notion of exoticism, stressing concepts of ambivalence and hybridity, and paying attention to the artists' aesthetic imagination besides the ideological motivations associated with the colonial project.⁵¹ In Biasi's case we find both the negotiation between realism and imagination which is the stuff of exoticism, and the issues of identity, domination and control which are at the core of Orientalism; with its complexity, his painting invites us to abandon binary thinking and move toward more flexible models.

⁴⁹ Dominique Jarrassé, "Usage fasciste de l'art colonial et dénis d'histoire de l'art. Les *Mostre d'arte coloniale* (Rome 1931 et Naples 1934), *Studiolo*, 13 (2016), 236-263.

⁵⁰ Edward W. Said, *Orientalism* (London: Penguin, 1978).

⁵¹ The first study to transfer Said's theory into the art historical field was Linda Nochlin's "The Imaginary Orient", *Art in America*, LXXI, no. 5 (1983), 118-31; 187-91. More recently, several writers have criticized the fixity of Said's binary oppositions, seeing in the "instability" of the exotic representations a more useful interpretative tool. Among them, Peter Mason, *Infelicities. representations of the exotic* (Baltimore-London: John Hopkins University Press, 1998); Frederic Bohrer, *Orientalism and Visual Culture. Imagining Mesopotamia in Nineteenth Century Europe* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000); Julia Kuehn, "Exotic Harem Paintings. Gender, Documentation, and Imagination", *Frontiers*, 32, no. 2 (2011), 32-63. Also Roger Benjamin (*Orientalist Aesthetics. Art, Colonialism, and French North Africa 1880-1930*, California University Press 2003) with his metaphor of the "oriental mirage" points out the shifting character of the exotic vision.

⁴⁶ See Roberto Papini, "Prima mostra internazionale d'arte coloniale. Arte e Colonie", *Emporium*, LXXIV, no. 443 (November 1931): 283; Alberto Spaini, "L'Esposizione d'arte coloniale", *Il Secolo XX*, press clipping, 1931, Biasi Archive, Capena (Rome).

⁴⁷ Gavino Gabriel, "La sala di Giuseppe Biasi alla Mostra Coloniale Internazionale", *Il Giornale d'Italia*, October 9, 1931.

⁴⁸ Biasi to Pandolfi, Cyrene, August 18, 1925, PA.