

Fascism on display: the afterlife of material legacies of the dictatorship

Flaminia Bartolini

McDonald Institute for Archaeological Research; Cambridge Heritage Research Centre,
University of Cambridge

Abstract

The year 2015 marked the seventy-fifth anniversary of the end of World War II, a commemoration that prompted Italy to reconsider the complexity of the Fascist phenomenon and how the artistic creations and urbanism of the regime contributed to shaping city landscapes across the country. Fascist material legacies are an unequivocal presence in any Italian city, but the ways in which they have been preserved or not, reused or abandoned, provokes consideration of the complexities of the country's renegotiation of its Fascist past, shifting from iconoclasm to present-day heritage status. Heritage designation and the restoration of Fascist works of art and architecture have posed questions regarding selectivity in heritage and whether Italy has yet to come to terms with its Fascist past. This paper will look at how Italy's approach to Fascist heritage, which has recently been framed as 'difficult heritage' following Macdonald's work on Nazi Germany, is an expression of the conflicting narratives that surround any renegotiation of the Fascist past, and how some recent conservation projects and exhibition have failed to demonstrate reflexivity over Fascism. It will also deconstruct the role of restoration and the heritage practices of preservation and management and will question the link between conservation and changes of attitude regarding a 'difficult' past.

Keywords: Difficult Heritage, Fascism, Nazism, Mussolini, Contested Architecture

Contested legacies and heritage as a social construct: locating the field

This research focuses on the scholarly debate over Fascist heritage as 'difficult heritage' that has emerged in recent years among cultural historians and architectural and art historians which has framed the question around micro-histories of individual sites. What this article wishes to add to the debate is an analysis from the perspective of the social sciences around the material legacies of the regime, using case studies to take the discussion further. The theoretical framework used in this paper sits within the field of Heritage Studies and sees the heritage-making process as a means of exploring the socio-political construct (Sørensen & Viejo-Rose 2015). The research has two principal aims: to illustrate and analyse Fascist heritage and the contemporary shift in perception that

CONTACT: Flaminia Bartolini, fb282@cam.ac.uk

followed heritage designation; and to examine how this contemporary ‘rediscovery’ is the end result of the process of coming to terms with a dictatorial past. Italy’s lack of both a national museum providing an interpretation of the country’s Fascist past, and of a War Museum debating Italy’s role in World War II, makes an examination of how architecture and works of art have been transformed into heritage relevant in understanding Italy’s post-Fascist identity construction.¹

This research has developed from the author’s doctoral research on the perception of Fascist heritage based on ethnographic research and participant observation. This shed light not only on how some cultural institutions have decided to remember or forget Fascism, but also on how public perception of these places has changed: analysis of Mussolini’s Villa Torlonia in Rome showed how, in Italy, public condemnation of the legacies of the regime never really reached the level of public debate seen by Macdonald around Nuremberg (Macdonald 2006, 2009). In Italy, far from being places of negative emotions, sites like Villa Torlonia are today places of leisure-time activities where Mussolini is presented like any other historical figure (Bartolini 2018; see below Fig. 1). From *damnatio memoriae* in the post-war period, followed by either abandonment, neglect or reuse, to contemporary rehabilitation, it becomes clear that the dark memories once attached to Fascist heritage have been transformed, which raises questions regarding the normalisation of Fascism and revisionist instances.

This paper will be divided into three parts. Firstly, I will discuss the scholarly debate around Fascist material legacies, and how and why the field has flourished in recent years. Secondly, I will describe case studies of recent exhibitions on Fascism and how they came about and thirdly I will consider the role Fascist heritage has in the process of renegotiating Italy’s Fascist past.

¹ The city of Bolzano was the first to display a permanent exhibition on the Italian dictatorship, located in the basement of the Monument to Victory, a Fascist memorial to the annexation of South Tyrol by Italy in World War I. For details about the Fascist dictatorship exhibition, see Michielli & Obermair 2016.



Figure 1. Rome, Villa Torlonia. (Photo Flaminia Bartolini ©)

Defining Fascist material legacies, from ‘heritage’ to ‘difficult heritage’

The two fundamental and most cited works of the debate on the afterlife of Fascist material legacies are Joshua Arthurs’ work on the Foro Italico (2010, 2014) and Sharon Macdonald’s 2009 publication on the renegotiation of Nazi Heritage in Nuremberg. Arthurs is the first to consider Fascist architecture around the city of Rome as contemporary heritage of the dictatorship, observing how locals have decided to protect this complex layer of history. He argues that the way this process took place was quite uncritical and suggests this might reflect the difficulties of coming to terms with the past for some people, while at the same time inspiring neo-Fascist propaganda amongst others. According to Macdonald (2009: 7), ‘difficult heritage’ arises when a past is recognised as worth remembering but at the same time creates difficulties in the present, as it generates conflict in dealing with contemporary identity. Similarly, in Italy the ‘difficult’ Fascist heritage generated a fear of perpetuating social division and fuelling divided memories in the post-war period, so a process of removing Fascist symbols from public buildings, both spontaneous and authorised, occurred (Bartolini 2018, 2019).

For other scholars there is no direct link between the lack of a critical approach to Fascist heritage, Italy’s post-war identity crisis, and the recent rise in neo-Fascist groups in Italy. For some, like Carter and Martin (2017, 2019), Malone (2017, 2019), Storch (2019) and Marcello (2019), even if Fascist legacies should be described as ‘difficult heritage’, there is no reading of them as a social process: Fascist legacies are viewed only in terms of their historicity, positioning the argument away from critical heritage studies and more within the perennial dispute over the field of history and memory.

This paper follows the work of both Arthurs and Macdonald on heritage and sees the transformation of places associated with the dictatorship and the way they have, or have not, been reused, as testifying to the shift in meaning attributed to these places. The creation of a museum display and exhibitions can serve both to remember or forget a difficult past, or even provide a selective narrative of the dictatorial past (Bartolini 2018: 5). As we shall see, the following case studies illustrate both state and private attempts to debate Fascist heritage and how they ultimately reveal a national difficulty in dealing with the Fascist past.

Fascist heritage and the contested monument debate

In 2017, an article by Ruth Ben-Ghiat in *The New Yorker* created a wave of discontent in Italy by asking why Fascist monumental architecture had been left unquestioned in Italy (Ben-Ghiat 2017). Ben-Ghiat was not alone in her questioning of attitudes: in Italy, the seventy-fifth commemoration of the end of WWII sparked a debate surrounding some of the most iconic monuments which saw the left-wing President of the Lower Chamber of Parliament, Laura Boldrini, asking for the removal or covering of the words *Mussolini DUX* from the obelisk at the centre of the Foro Italico complex in Rome (Malone 2017; Bartolini 2018; see below Fig. 2). In this case, as also in the response to Ben-Ghiat's article, public debate was quite unanimous in criticising any reworking or removal of such monuments (Bartolini 2018: 4).



Figure 2. Rome, Foro Italico, Palazzo H and Mussolini's obelisk (Photo: Flaminia Bartolini ©)

Public perception of Fascist heritage in contemporary Italy can be described as having been ‘de-politicised’: as has emerged from recent scholarly work, regardless of people’s political views, Fascist monuments in contemporary Italy are seen as part of the rest of the country’s vast cultural heritage legacy (Bartolini 2018: 5). Until recently, this conspicuous material legacy of the dictatorship had been left undisturbed in the landscape, very often reused for its original purpose, sometimes given a new use. Complete destruction of buildings was limited to wartime aerial bombing or dictated by the impossibility of reusing a building.

The so-called ‘de-fascistization’ process saw the removal of fasces and other Fascist symbols from public buildings, but was very often limited to the removal of the word Mussolini or Fascist mottos and the axes from the fasces (Bartolini 2018). Many Italian cities are still full not only with Fascist monuments, but also infrastructure such as train stations, gyms, and schools which very often feature Fascist symbols that escaped the removal. Sometimes the most interesting evidence lay in plain sight, as is the case for both the plinth of the sculpture known as the *Genius of Fascism* and Mussolini’s head in the Palazzo Uffici in the E.U.R. neighbourhood of Rome (Fig. 3). The former escaped removal thanks to a timely re-naming from Virgilio Testa in 1952 as *Genius of Sport*, but surprisingly the plinth which exhibited the words *Roma Aeterna*, together with three fasces, is still in the gardens of the building, just conveniently away from the rest of the sculpture. This setting is telling of how the process of removal occurred: it happened very quickly, leaving many legacies in place or maybe just around the corner and never addressed even 75 years on.



Figure 3. Rome, Palazzo Uffici, lateral entrance with *Genius of Fascism* (Photo: Flaminia Bartolini ©)

The second example, in the Palazzo Uffici, is the relief with the history of Fascism and one of the few surviving examples of Mussolini on horseback in a public place (Fig. 4). The relief is at the entrance of the buildings which should have hosted the administrative offices of the 1942 World Fair Exhibition in Rome; these were later repurposed as various offices in the post-war period.



Figure 4. Rome, Palazzo Uffici, lateral entrance with Mussolini horse-riding (Photo: Flaminia Bartolini ©)



Figure 5. Rome, Palazzo Uffici, Press room, Mussolini head (Photo: Flaminia Bartolini ©)

The building still retains its original name, as does the entire quarter, despite having been renamed 'Europa' after the war. Mussolini's figure at the entrance has been defaced several times since 1945, as emerged from interviews with E.U.R. s.p.a. staff, but the company has always restored the damaged. In the same building, in 2003 a bust of Mussolini's head was taken back from the basement where it was stored and placed in the conference room, provoking several complaints to E.U.R. s.p.a. (Fig. 5). The company made a declaration to the press that they decided not to put Mussolini's head back in the Great Hall where it was originally, but it could be argued that while the *Salone d'Onore* is closed to the public, the conference room is where press conferences are held for Italian and foreign media, so the bust is now, in fact, highly visible to the public.

It was on 23 November 2017, during the celebrations marking the eightieth anniversary of the foundation of the *Città Universitaria*, Rome's City University La Sapienza, that there was an even more significant shift in the meaning attached to Fascist legacies: this was the re-opening of Mario Sironi's newly restored mural depicting the Arts and Sciences in the Great Hall of the university campus (Fig. 6). Attending the opening was the President of the Republic, Sergio Mattarella, and the ceremony was introduced by the rector of La Sapienza, Eugenio Gaudio, and the rector of the Université Libre de Bruxelles, Yvon Englert. The leaders of the restoration project, Marina Righetti, Director of the

Department of History of Art and Gisella Capponi, Director of the Higher Institute for Conservation and Restoration, gave a presentation illustrating their work and the results of the restoration.

The opening was described by the newspapers as ‘the end of an iconoclastic era’ or as ‘the rebirth of the genius of Sironi’ because for the first time not only had Fascist frescos been restored and presented in a major exhibition in the presence of leading political and heritage figures, but Fascist symbols had also been restored. If swastikas recently found in Germany are still being blown off with dynamite, Italy, on the contrary, is taking very good care of its Fascist symbols. What mattered at this event was that finally a work of art was given ‘justice’ after years of neglect.

Work on the new university, one of the three main Fascist developments in the city together with the Foro Italico and the E.U.R., began in 1933 and the complex was formally opened on 31 October 1935. The head of the project, Marcello Piacentini, called upon established architects to design the individual buildings, including Arnaldo Foschini, Giuseppe Pagano, Pietro Aschieri, Giovanni Ponti, Giovanni Michelucci, Gaetano Rapisardi and Giuseppe Capponi. In the Great Hall of the Palace of the Rectory Mario Sironi executed the mural ‘Italy between the Arts and Sciences’, while Arturo Martini designed the statue of Minerva, which the author always called ‘Athena’.



Figure 6. Rome, La Sapienza Great Hall, Mario Sironi fresco of *The Arts and the Sciences* (Photo: Flaminia Bartolini ©).

The idea of restoring Sironi's mural was originally conceived in 1985 during research for the fiftieth anniversary of the University City. Following post-war de-fascistization, the fresco was extensively 'repainted' in 1950 and during conservation works in 1982 it was noted that a poster and several layers of glue had been stuck on top of the modified fresco. In 1982, the scientific committee in charge of the restoration believed Sironi's fresco was irretrievably lost. However, thanks to advances in conservation scanning techniques, in 2015 scientists were able to see that the original was still in good condition so the decision was taken to try and rescue it. The agreement for the contemporary restoration, which was a collaboration between the Ministry of Scientific Research, the Ministry of Culture and the Higher Institute for Conservation and Restoration, was signed on 20 April 2015. The official press release explained the decision-making behind the restoration, arguing that:

"We have considered for a long time whether to restore the frescos: the great painting of the Great Hall is in fact a figurative document of extraordinary importance relating to the work of Mario Sironi, to the history of the University City, and Italian figurative art more generally between the two wars" (Billi & D'Agostino 2017: 45).

What emerged from this restoration project that is most relevant to the renegotiation of Fascist legacies are the details of what was censored or modified in the post-war era. The 140m² fresco had a composition which saw Italy at the centre surrounded by personifications of Astronomy, Mineralogy, Botany, Geography, Architecture, Letters, Painting and History. The original representation of Italy depicted her as a goddess at war, with a sword leaning along her left side and a crown which symbolised the protective city wall; in 1950 the crown and the sword disappeared, leaving a more neutral image of the country. The flying victory, a recurrent image within Fascist iconography, was similarly depicted with a helmet and a sword, which again were removed. In the background, at the centre, are those compositions that were entirely covered over: 2 m high fasces with the years of the foundation of the university, a Roman eagle and *insigna*, and a triumphal arch with Mussolini riding in front of it (Fig. 7).

What this fresco stands for is a summation of all the conflicting symbols that were removed in the post-war period, but it also gives even more detail than previous analysis has allowed. The novelty which emerged from this restoration is the fact that what was removed was the idea of Italy at war, Italy as a militarised society, a country which was just embarking on the conquest of Ethiopia and had imperialist aspirations. So while Fascist symbols and Mussolini on horseback had faded into the landscape, Italy and victory were modified towards a more bucolic image, very much in line with the post-war narrative of the country as a victim of Nazi occupation and manoeuvres, rather than an aggressive entity in its own right.



Figure 7. Rome, La Sapienza Great Hall, Mario Sironi fresco of *The Arts and the Sciences*, detail of the fasces with the eagle (Photo: Flaminia Bartolini ©).

However, the way the unveiling event was perceived by the public and by the media was quite different. Framed as a means of Italy ‘dealing with the Fascist past’, the actual meaning of ‘dealing’ was more one of accepting Fascism as an historical event rather than challenging its ideology. The only ideology that was debated by the media at the event was anti-Fascism, perceived as iconoclastic ideology obscuring Fascist works of art. What was portrayed was the final end to the ‘cultural hegemony’ of anti-Fascism over Fascism – now seen only as an historical period in the past, with no legacies in the present day, something which cannot happen again.

MuSa museum exhibition on the Cult of the Duce: genuine collectors or devotion?

The city of Salò is a place where ties with the Social Republic are still relatively strong – in the new guise of heritage sites. The city of Salò today is a popular summer destination on Lake Garda, attracting both local and foreign tourists more for the microclimate of the region than for cultural interest. However, the city’s more recent history offers an unavoidable element of interest for tourists visiting the area, as most of the historical buildings and hotels were used during the Social Republic by both the Nazi and Fascist armies and government. During the summer of 2018, when this part of the research took place, several types of heritage event were taking place in Salò relating to the history of the Social Republic and Mussolini himself.

The most interesting aspect of the heritage landscape in Salò is the exhibition at the MuSa museum run by Giordano Bruno Guerri, an individual also known for his ‘revisionist’ work on Bottai and D’Annunzio and through his managerial work at the Vittoriale degli Italiani, D’Annunzio’s resting place. Bruno Guerri is the curator of the Mussolini exhibition at MuSa and he is considering enlarging the collection to establish a Museum of Fascism in Salò; he claims as one of his principal achievements having “fascistized the cultural heritage of Salò” (Giordano Bruno Guerri, personal interview, Salò 28/8/2018). The MuSa’ collection grew out of a preliminary exhibition on the history of Fascism in Salò as seen through the eyes of a Fascist and an Anti-Fascist, with the support of a multi-

media installation. This first segment of the display starts with images of Mussolini on posters and portraits lent by private ‘collectors’ before moving on to try and give some sense of the iconic events of the *Ventennio*. Curiously, the exhibition starts with a description of the killing of Mussolini and the violence of the Partisans using two iconic images: Mussolini’s execution in Piazzale Loreto and the one image that refers to a partisan execution of a civilian, Giuseppina Gherzi (Fig. 8). While these are powerful examples of the brutality of partisan executions, there is no counter-narrative presenting examples of Fascist violence. The display continues with a section on the film *Arte di Arrangiarsi*, followed by testimony from witnesses of the war, both Jewish and from the *Foibe*.² Subsequent panels, which are based on the bombing by the Allies, stress the point of view of citizens and of the terror of war. Associated with this section is a display of luggage of people escaping from bombing and war, set against a backdrop of a bunker and contemporary film footage from the war.



Figure 8. Salò, MuSa, display of the permanent collection on the history of fascism (Photo: Flaminia Bartolini ©)

The second section of the exhibition, the one which was conceived by Bruno Guerri, looks specifically at the Cult of the Duce from 1922 to 1945 (Guerri 2016; see below Fig. 9). Mussolini’s iconography on display follows chronologically and gives an interesting reading of how the face of the Duce moved from a ‘Giolittian’ nineteenth-century neo-classical style to the Futurist examples of Corghi, Bertelli, and Barbara. Bruno Guerri’s message in this exhibition is that Mussolini is inextricably linked with the Salò landscape and that there should be no shame in presenting an exhibition on him in 2018. Guerri recalled that at the time of the opening, a few members of the ANPI association protested

² Massacres carried out by Yugoslav partisans (and possibly Fascists) during World War II.

in front of the museum but there have been neither nostalgic pilgrimages nor anti-fascist protests within. The exhibition, presented in a public museum with little or no historical context, gives an edited version of the historical facts and fulfils the neo-fascist paradigm of Fascist and Anti-Fascist both using violence and thus being two faces of the same coin. Part of this narrative of equating Fascism and Anti-Fascism is reflected in the institution of a Holocaust Commemoration Day in 2005 and a Day of Memory for the victims of Communist mass murders. As Robert Gordon (2006) explains in his work on the introduction of a commemoration day for the Italian Fascist mass killing by Tito's Communist supporters in Yugoslavia, there is a link between the institution of this commemoration day and the commemoration of the Holocaust in Italy. Gordon argues that the fact that Italy established the Day of Memory of the Holocaust in the same year as the commemoration day for Fascists killed by Communists is a sign of how the coalition government of Berlusconi and the far-right wanted to give them an equal sense of justice and commemoration. This process of renegotiating Fascist crimes along the same lines as Communist crimes is a deliberately apologetic strategy that can also be fostered, as we have seen, through heritage sites and exhibitions.



Figure 9. Salò, MuSa, display of the exhibition *Il Culto del Duce* (Photo: Flaminia Bartolini ©)

Concluding remarks

The heritage-making process of the Fascist legacy reflects the diverse values which Italian society has attributed to Fascism itself and which have informed heritage decisions at different times. Cultural heritage has traditionally been considered crucial in the formation of national identity and at times of social crisis such as a dictatorship or war can help in

understanding how politics and heritage mutually inform each other. Heritage is always the result of a selection of what is worth remembering or forgetting and is never a neutral selection of a 'true' past (Sørensen & Viejo-Rose 2015). What this paper has investigated is which are the narratives about Fascism that Italy has decided to remember, or not.

If the transformation of Mussolini's material legacies into heritage can be seen as part of the renegotiation of Fascism that followed the fall of communism in 1989, and which coincided with the beginning of the Berlusconi era in Italy (1993), what emerged from this research is a step forward. What has been defined as the "crisis of the anti-fascist paradigm" (Focardi 2014: 97) has now, within the Italian heritage debate, reached the level of Fascist material legacies being the victims of left-wing ideology. The perceived 'holiness' of cultural heritage in public perception has facilitated a reading of the iconoclasm that followed the fall of the regime as an act of ideology in itself, something that now should be condemned or amended for in light of the supposed apolitical role of cultural heritage.

Restoring Fascist symbols uncritically, as in the case of the Sironi fresco, just like any other work of art, has opened the way to exhibitions like the one at the MuSa with a clear apologetic intent. Behind 'preservation' and 'knowledge' can be easily hidden the political agendas of the far-right as they attempt to use cultural heritage as a political tool. The MuSa renegotiation of the narrative of the Resistance was sustained by far-right and neo-fascist groups with the intention to diminish the role of the freedom fighters in the Liberation from Nazi-Fascism and reverse the post-war new, democratic, anti-Fascist values (Ventresca 2004; Focardi 2014). In the case of the Salò exhibitions, having a display framed around a Fascist/Anti-Fascist interpretation and reconstruction of the events might suggest the museum's intention to 'resolve' conflicting memories of this problematic past by offering a 'softer' and 'better' version of Mussolini as a historical figure, stressing anti-Fascist violence. As we saw earlier, Robert Gordon (2006) explains a commemoration day for the Italian Fascist mass killing by Tito's Communist supporters in Yugoslavia as being a sign of how the coalition government of Berlusconi and the far-right wanted to give them an equal sense of justice and commemoration.

Moreover, the way legacies have been looked after or not illustrate the different ways in which Fascist Heritage has been reframed in contemporary Italy: Mussolini's iconography and restoration of Fascist symbols of the leader have remained triggers for different degrees of fascination for the leader from the post-war era to the present day. To conclude, I would argue that Fascist material legacies are still a strong source of fascination in contemporary Italy, and the fact that in the last ten years many work of art and architecture of the *Ventennio* have become heritage and have re-entered the public domain, reflects not just a national struggle in questioning and confronting the past, but possibly also a worrying sense of Fascist pride.

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