

# EXHIBITION GUIDE: INTRODUCTION

*Dawit L. Petros: Spazio Disponibile* is an exhibition that stems from years of research on Italian colonialism, a subject that requires careful historical considerations and ongoing reflections on current events. To contextualize the exhibition, the students of Italian 422: Modern Italian Literature, taught by Associate Professor Laura Chiesa in Fall 2020, have prepared four relevant research reports on subjects directly explored by Petros in the exhibition:

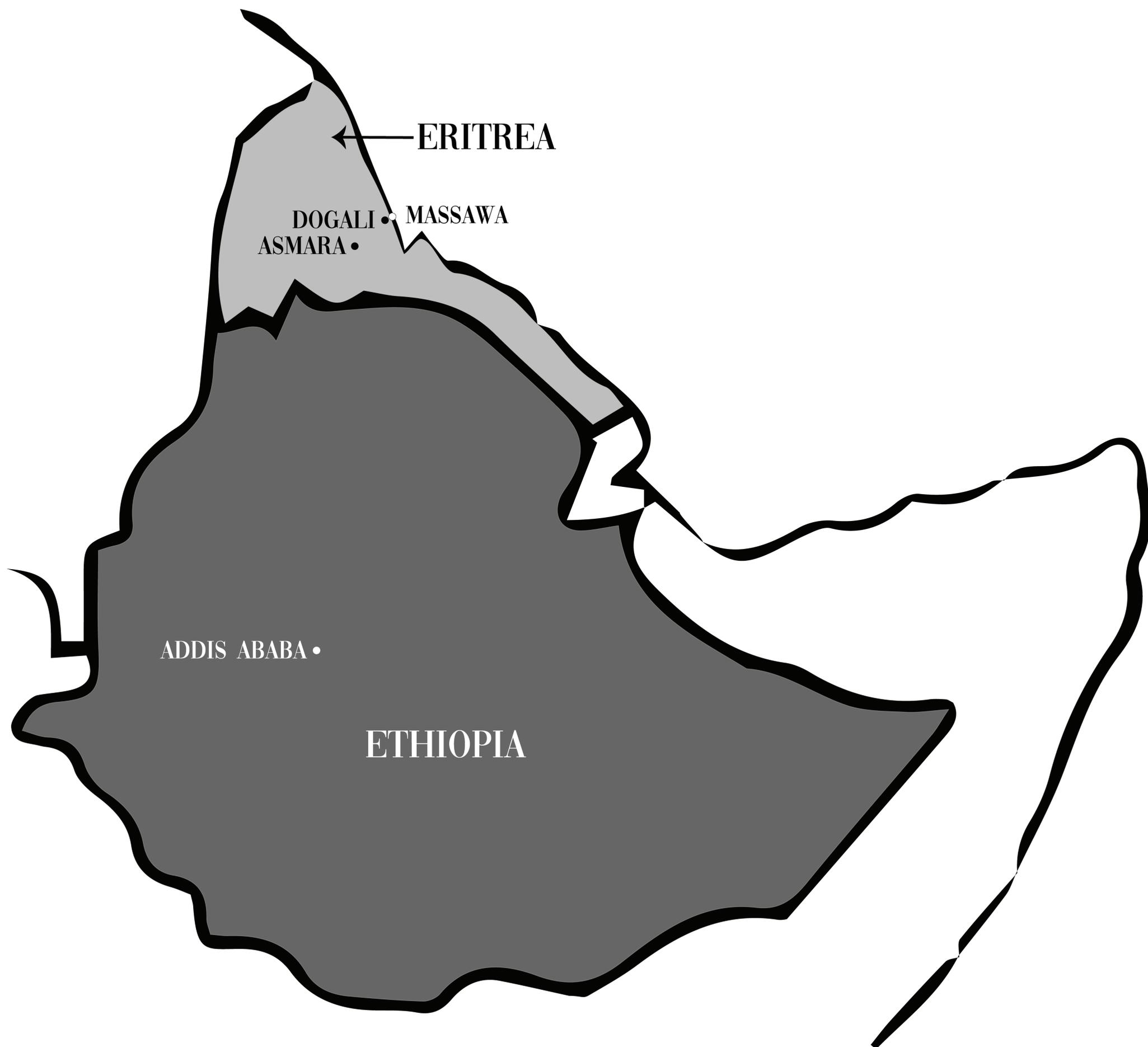
1. *Africa Orientale Italiana* (Italian East Africa);
2. *Rivista Coloniale* (Colonial Magazine);
3. *Istituto Luce*;
4. *La Teleferica* (Asmara-Massawa Cableway).

Additionally, Jillian Daniels, UB Art Galleries Student Curatorial Assistant, has contributed maps, a timeline, and a list of keywords to help frame these topics. The culmination of a semester-long student engagement, this guide helps deepen our appreciation of the artist's work and inquiry, as well as offer entry points for a more profound understanding of the state of nationhood in Italy and East Africa today.

UB Art Galleries gratefully acknowledges the generous participation of Laura Chiesa, Associate Professor, Department of Romance Languages and Literatures; her students Maria Angela, Brianna Badalamenti, Leonardo Camerucci, Sabrina Gramuglia, and Adrian Halvorsen; and Jillian Daniels, Student Curatorial Assistant.

# PRESENT-DAY ERITREA AND ETHIOPIA

Prepared by Jillian Daniels



# PRESENT-DAY ITALY AND THE HORN OF AFRICA

Prepared by Jillian Daniels



# KEYWORDS

Prepared by Jillian Daniels

## MODERNITY:

The modern period in art refers to the nineteenth and twentieth centuries when many existing cultural norms were rejected in pursuit of innovation through technology. This period of influx of new ideas and experimentation also witnessed the intensification of military armament, colonial expansion, and fascism in the construction of modern nation-states.

## COLONIALISM:

Originating from the Latin word *colonus*, meaning farmer, colonialism is a policy of taking control of territories and peoples through socioeconomic and political subjugation. Although the history of colonization reaches back to ancient civilizations, it has come to be associated today with European colonialism, including the Scramble for Africa in the late nineteenth and the early twentieth centuries.

## FASCISM:

At the end of World War I, Benito Mussolini took up the term *fascismo* or fascism to describe the growing far-right political organization that he headed and reigned as *Il Duce* of the National Fascist Party. The term derives from *fascio*, an ancient Roman symbol comprised of a bundle of sticks and an axe blade tied with a leather strap. This iconography was deployed strategically by Fascist Italy to conjure the might of the Roman Empire. Today, the term is often used pejoratively to describe totalitarian and nationalist states.

## MOBILITY:

In the context of today's social sciences, mobility explores movements of people from one location to another as well as the social consequences of the movements. The motivations are many—some positive, some negative—as well as their impacts. Mobility in the form of Italian emigration was central to the creation and maintenance of the Italian Empire in its African colonies and the creation of transnational identities and cultures abroad.

# *AFRICA ORIENTALE ITALIANA*

Prepared by Maria Angela, Brianna Badalamenti, and Leonardo Camerucci

*Africa Orientale Italiana* (Italian East Africa) denoted Italy's colonies in the Horn of Africa and consisted of the present-day Eritrea, Ethiopia, and parts of Somalia. Although *Africa Orientale Italiana* was formalized in 1936 after the October 1935 invasion of Ethiopia, Italian presence in East Africa began in the late nineteenth century. Following Italy's failed attempt to invade and occupy Ethiopia, the border between Ethiopia and Italian-controlled territories of Eritrea were drawn up and Eritrea was officially declared Italy's first colony in 1890. By 1900, most of Africa was claimed by Europe in what came to be known as the Scramble for Africa. It was during this period of colonization that Italy laid the foundation for its colonial project. Under the leadership of Benito Mussolini, whose Fascist government rose to power in Italy in 1922, there was a deliberate attempt to draw on the legacy of the ancient Roman Empire to legitimate Italian presence in Africa. Using outlawed chemical weapons in addition to advanced military technology, Italy invaded Ethiopia in 1935, consolidated its control of the territories, and formed *Africa Orientale Italiana*.

Mussolini declared the city of Asmara in Eritrea as the administrative center of *Africa Orientale Italiana* and encouraged Italian settlement in Eritrea. The number of Italian residents in Asmara increased from 4,600 to 75,000 within the span of five years. By 1939, Italy set up over two thousand factories where the majority of labor was supplied by Eritreans. Mussolini's government encouraged Italian architects and engineers to transform Asmara into a center of Italian culture and art, dubbing the city *La Piccola Roma* (Little Rome). Following the dismantling of the Italian Fascist government at the end of World War II, many of the Italian buildings, structures, and machinery were dismantled by the British, including *la teleferica*, an iconic cableway that symbolized the strength of the Italian government during its colonization of East Africa. Many iconic buildings such as Cinema Impero, Cinema Roma, Asmara Opera House, and Fiat Tagliero—all built during *Africa Orientale Italiana*—still stand in Asmara as examples of the lasting legacy of Italian colonialism in Eritrea.

# *RIVISTA COLONIALE*

Prepared by Maria Angela, Brianna Badalamenti, and Leonardo Camerucci

*Rivista Coloniale* (Colonial Magazine) was the official publication that outlined the organization of the Italian colonial expansion program during the Scramble for Africa. Publication began in January 1906, with Volume I illustrating the political, scientific, and economic affairs of the Italian government, mechanisms and legislative strategies used in the formation of the colony of Eritrea, and additional information pertaining to other colonies. The magazine also published advertisements for business ventures that profited from resource extraction in Africa such as import/export and shipping companies. *Rivista Coloniale* remained in circulation until 1943, when Benito Mussolini was ousted from the government and the National Fascist Party was dissolved.

In the first issue of *Rivista Coloniale*, the section *Legislazione Coloniale* (Colonial Legislation) contains two important parts: *Relazione Ministeriale* (Ministerial Report) and *Relazione dell'Ufficio Centrale* (Central Office Report). The reports discuss the opposing methods of Italian colonial expansion. *Relazione Ministeriale* explains how Italy implemented a new civil code that heavily favored Italian immigrants with no regards to incorporating the Eritrean people's rights, culture, and way of life. It promoted segregation and racism through the imbalance of rights between the white Italians and the Black natives. The Italian administration, however, brought about significant changes to life in Eritrea including enhanced communication and transportation systems such as railways, roads, and cable cars. A new communication system connected Eritrea to the surrounding towns of Senafe, Massawa, and Keren. The new infrastructure was built primarily using local labor; nevertheless, the colonial administration put in place measures to prevent the Indigenous populations from using the new technologies and knowledge. Conversely, *Relazione dell'Ufficio Centrale* expressed the necessity of having a so-called united colony under the rule of the centralized government to maintain what they referred to as an equilibrium between the Eritrean and Italian residents.

# *ISTITUTO LUCE*

Prepared by Sabrina Gramuglia and Adrian Halvorsen

Instituto Luce was established by Benito Mussolini in 1924 as a non-profit “moral institution” governed by public law. During the fascist regime, Instituto Luce operated primarily to produce propaganda films and documentaries. At this time, cinema and photography were two major ways to disseminate information. With access to Instituto Luce as an arm of the fascist government, Mussolini was able to address the masses in ways never done before. In 1927, Instituto Luce began producing newsreels called *Giornale Luce* that were required to be shown at all cinemas as part of their screenings. These newsreels proved to be a powerful and effective instrument used in spreading propaganda, especially among the illiterate Italian population and in overseas colonies. Other totalitarian nations implemented similar styles of *cinegiornale* (newsreels) for the same purposes.

Although *Giornale Luce* saw its demise with the fall of Fascist Italy, Instituto Luce continued production in Rome until 2009 when it officially ceased operations. Today, Instituto Luce serves as a historical archive as opposed to a platform to spread propaganda. Available as a searchable database on their website, Luce Historical Archive contains film, photographs, and documentary collections between the years 1924 and 1962. There are a total of three million photographs, some yet to be sorted and digitized, 12,000 newsreels, and 4,700 audiovisual documentaries of various types. This vast repository of historical files constitutes an important site of memory and reflections on Italian culture and heritage, including its colonial and fascist past.

# *TELEFERICA*

Prepared by Sabrina Gramuglia and Adrian Halvorsen

Along with the influx of Italian settlers in Asmara, Eritrea in the early twentieth century came the need for a transportation network for goods and equipment. Thus, Italy built what was known as *la teleferica* or the Massawa-Asmara Cableway. The 44.7 miles of cableway was completed in 1937 to connect the port city Massawa to the capital Asmara, solving the problem of transporting goods to the mainland on hilly and uneven terrain that was difficult to navigate. The cableway also decreased the dependency on the railway. Celebrated as a technological marvel and victory for Italy, *la teleferica* boasted the longest aerial three-wire cableway system in the world. Supported by nearly five hundred iron towers, the cableway had eight motors running on diesel engines and a telephone line to make communication along the cableway easier. It transferred goods at thirty-three tons per hour in each direction from zero altitude in Massawa to 7,631 feet above sea level in Asmara. The cableway started in Massawa, continuing through Zaga, Dogali, Mai Atal, Sabarguma, Ghinda, Nefasit, and Godaif before reaching Asmara. Construction of the cableway required intensive labor supplied by Eritreans and many long, murderous trips men and animals took to carry motors, control mechanisms, and lumber. Construction sites were sometimes located in an area without roads and many died during construction or were badly injured.

During the war, its major use was to transport food, supplies, and arms for the Imperial Italian Army. Photographic documents of the cableway during this period show the Italian petroleum company Agip's fuel depots in Massawa. The British dismantled the cableway in 1941 after they defeated Italy in East African Campaign of World War II, removing the valuable engines as war reparations. The remaining iron towers were scrapped in the 1980s.

# TIMELINE

Prepared by Jillian Daniels

