

The Italia Turrita and the Feminization of Fascist Colonialism¹

The Case of the Livia de Kuzmik Papini Reliefs in Bolzano-Bozen, Italy

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Introduction

The stone reliefs are easy to miss, tucked away under the arches connecting the former buildings of Italy's national insurance institute that border the Piazza Vittoria, a prominent public space in Bolzano-Bozen. They are protected by nets, presumably to capture falling fragments, which makes it even more difficult to see the details of the designs. But the attentive observer who gazes upwards can discern various representations of women in the reliefs, which were sculpted by the Hungarian artist named Livia de Kuzmik Papini in the 1930s. The reliefs thus proffer what can be considered a challenge to the marginalization of women in heritage spaces as testament to the prominence of a female artist and the rare opportunity to create public art. Moreover, the allegories of women featured in the reliefs speak to traditional themes of femininity – a woman's protective and reproductive powers – that are linked to the nation of Italy and the welfare functions of the national insurance institute. However, a closer gender reading of the relationship of the women in the reliefs reveals how a feminine symbol of Italy, the *Italia Turrita*, hovers over figures of other women of African background in the composition, suggesting a protective but also authoritative stance over women based in Italy's colonial territories. Despite being appreciated as examples of public art that represent women and are created by a female artist, the reliefs sustain and reinforce a colonial and fascist imaginary where notions of femininity and racism were imbricated in support of Italy's empire building.

1 The author wishes to express her gratitude to Anna Tüdös and Elisa Piras for their guidance and assistance in the writing of this chapter.

While the reliefs may be less known and difficult to even study up close, various historians and initiatives inspired by the statue wars and decolonialization debates are focusing attention on the reliefs to reconsider their meanings. The advent of heritage politics around the material and architectural legacies of fascist colonialism in Italy reflects various transnational, historical and social forces related to these debates. Today, through guided tours and curricular materials, the public is being taught to view the reliefs through anti-colonial and feminist lenses. For the attentive visitor, the reliefs become a portal not only to a specific chapter in the history of Bolzano-Bozen and Italy but to an ongoing reckoning with the gendered and racial legacies of Italy's fascist colonial period.

Following the mission of this volume, in my approach to these reliefs, I employ gender as a perspective to interrogate, as Cynthia Enloe asserts, »What role is masculinity playing, and what role is femininity playing?« (Schouten/Dunham 2012, p. 6). I argue that this gender analysis will yield insights into the nature of these reliefs and their creation during the fascist colonial period in Italy as well as how and why they are being highlighted and politicized in today's discussions around difficult legacies in the architectural landscape. This research also brings a gender lens and contributes to material studies of colonialism that examine how European empires were recorded, celebrated and questioned (Belmonte and Cecchini 2022, p. 330) as well as to the study of how the historical legacies of this period are being confronted, challenged amid growing public awareness in order to prevent the re-use of these colonial imaginaries by authoritarian forces (De Pretto 2023). These stakes are heightened when we consider the ways in which public art used gender to justify fascism and colonialism as well as the ways in which gender today is shaped by those imaginaries and the remnants imprinted on the heritage landscape.

In this chapter, I examine de Kuzmik Papini's reliefs using a gender lens to go beyond examining their obvious functions as ornamental public art and to refract three different aspects of this cultural heritage. I introduce the notion of heritage politics to explain how the meanings of this public art have shifted in light of statue wars, decolonial debates and increased diversity in light of migration, which have led to interest, scrutiny, and resistances to colonial era cultural heritage. I provide context of Italy and South Tyrol's experience with the empire-building and colonial period under Mussolini and the architectural legacies of this period. Then I move to the reliefs themselves. First, I focus on the reliefs' creation by a female artist, examining the regrettably thin historical record of her biography, which obfuscates a fuller understanding of how she is remembered and contextualized. Second, I look at the reliefs themselves, drawing from art historical accounts and iconographic analysis, to situate their commission and execution in a particular location in history and space, as public art that had a specific propagandistic objective in a recently colonized city under a fascist regime as well as to explore and contrast how different female figures are represented in the composition. Finally, I examine two curricular guides

that reflect discourses around the reliefs in today's current climate: one guide looks at the Victory Monument and its surroundings and was created by the Autonomous Province of Bolzano-Bozen South Tyrol and the other was created as part of the »Decolonising minds« project led by the non-profit *Organisation für eine Solidarische Welt* (OEW), which brought together students in South Tyrol and Ethiopia to respond to the colonial legacies of the architectural landscapes in Bolzano-Bozen and Addis Ababa. Through this study, we arrive at a deeper understanding of how gender shapes heritage as well as how heritage shapes gender.

Linking Gender and Heritage

Connecting heritage and gender is a growing field (Colella 2018; De Nido 2017). Cultural heritage can be regarded as »gendered in the way heritage is defined, understood and talked about, and, in turn, in the way it reproduces and legitimizes gender identities and the social values that underpin them« (Smith 2008, p. 161). Within the heritage landscape, it is possible to detect hierarchical relationships that are based on the ways in which men and women are differentiated:

»Characteristics traditionally associated with masculinity include strength, protection, rationality, aggression, public life, domination, and leadership. On the other hand, weakness, vulnerability, emotion, passivity, privacy, submission, and care have been traditionally associated with femininity.«

(Sjoberg/Via 2010, p. 3)

Gender approaches to cultural heritage have begun to explore facets of these hierarchies; this includes examining the lack of women's heritage sites that may be significant to women's history or experience (Smith 2008), or to the gender and racial inequalities present in public art commemorating women's history such as suffrage in the USA where there are issues related to funding, commission, and placement (Rooney 2021). Or examining the ways in which gender and sexualities operate at military heritage sites (Åse and Wendt 2021) or in the public history of militarized landscapes (Budabin 2025). The social forces identified in debates on the lack of Great Women Artists (Nochlin 1971) can also now be extended to discussions of the dearth of female authorship of public statues (Peruzzi et al. 2022, p. 10). Further, scholarship is examining the role of women in protecting cultural heritage (de Vido 2018) or the role of feminist protests in challenging styles of representation of female figures that embody practices of patriarchy and female subordination (Peruzzi et al. 2022).

Bringing Gender to Heritage Politics

Recent debates on cultural heritage have unveiled new ways of confronting difficult historical legacies. These debates stem from the way that cultural heritage has a political character, with a connection to contentious politics (Tunbridge/Ashworth 1996). What can be described as a politics of heritage is reminiscent of a politics of memory, considered to be »who wants whom to remember what, and why« (Confino 1997, p. 1393), although we might also add the »how« and »where« as salient for the heritage landscape. As part of recent statue wars and decolonial discussions, the politics of heritage has been animated and interpreted through the lenses of anti-colonialism, anti-racism, and anti-patriarchy (Petruzzi et al. 2022). These lenses unsettle the fixed nature of cultural heritage in terms of who and what are remembered, the forms this heritagization takes, as well as the enduring justifications for preserving this heritage. Scholars use the term ›dissonant heritage‹ to analyze how diverse, competing groups and actors ascribe meaning differently (see Kisić 2017; van Huis et al. 2019). Public markers of urban habitat, cultural, social, and political identification expressing identity and pride can simultaneously signal legacies of colonization, discrimination, and a painful rupture of their history to others. Yet the ability to even signal cultural heritage as ›dissonant‹ will depend partly on whether certain social actors that make up the ›whom‹ are able to successfully participate in practices of meaning-making (Budabin 2023a). Adopting a gender approach to cultural heritage can heighten and nuance our understanding of the politics of heritage by helping think through all of the above categories.

In this inquiry, the focus is on the process of raising awareness and politicizing cultural heritage connected to gender aspects of the fascist colonial period. Within the Italian heritage landscape, recent scholarship has adopted a gender lens to examine the »who and what are remembered« in the built environment as well as »how«. This includes assessing the lack of women's representation in public spaces where the ubiquity of the male body and male personages is reflective of the dominant patriarchal culture (Baroni 2024). When women are represented in monuments in public spaces, Peruzzi et al. find that the statues tend to be of allegorical or mythical figures; for secular female figures, there are recurring stereotypic elements such as the exaltation of sexualized physical forms or unwarranted nudity, the non-elevation of the figure, and the celebration of martyrdom and sacrifice (2022, p. 13–14). Many of these elements will also be present in the de Kuzmik Papini reliefs as we shall see below.

Statue Wars and Decolonial Debates

In what has become a transnational movement, there has been a visible and effective period of engagement with cultural heritage connected to empire-building and

colonialism. Going back half a century, there have been many earlier instances of such »ideological vandalism« in settler societies such as Australia, South America, and Africa; it was also seen in the toppling of Soviet era statues across Eastern Europe. The recent episode of contentious politics around offensive monuments can be traced to 2015 (Knudsen/Andersen 2019, p. 244) when a student in Cape Town threw a bucket of feces on a statue of Cecil Rhodes launching the Rhodes Must Fall campaign. Confrontation of statues with offensive legacies would also become a significant aspect of the U.S. Black Lives Matter movement (see Benjamin et al. 2020; Shen 2017; Holland 2017).

The BLM movement has since gone global, galvanized by national level debates around racism and police mistreatment (Saric 2021). Recent acceleration and diffusion of this »global phenomenon of iconoclasm« has signaled the importance of analyzing these acts as related to local and national contexts but also »in dialogue with global processes of resistance« to imperialism, colonialism, along with postimperial and postcolonial developments (D'Ottavio et al. 2021, p. 667). Beyond denouncing the mistreatment of the black population in the United States, there have been »calls to rewrite slavery histories and past capitalist colonial exploitations« across the world along with demands for racial equality and anti-discrimination from a variety of marginalized communities (Allam et al. 2021, p. 3–4). The linking of the BLM message of antiracism and the global statue war's confrontation with colonial legacies was also witnessed in Italy where connections were made to local racism (Uyangoda 2020; Della Porta et al. 2022). De Pretto stresses that historical recontextualization of fascist-imperial inscriptions on the Italian built landscape is necessary to avoid re-use by authoritarian politicians in ways that prevent the development of a post-colonial society (2023, p. 19–20). Underscoring the historical legacies of gendered violence during fascist colonialism is being slowly integrated in these efforts at awareness-raising and interventions.

Background on Italian Colonial, Fascist, and Post-Colonial Legacies in South Tyrol

The case study of the gendered aspects of the de Kuzmik Papini reliefs needs to be scrutinized from within debates around the legacies of Italy's fascist period and its imperial and colonial ventures. Italy's systemic racism is traced to 19th and 20th century legacies of empire-building as well as recent migration movements (Uyangoda, 2020). Italy has a complicated relationship to its colonial and fascist past. Colonial expansion began soon after Italy's unification in 1861 and the first formal colony was set up in Eritrea in 1890. Italian expansion later extended to Libya, Ethiopia, and Somalia in what was proclaimed as the *Africa Orientale Italiana* (Italian East Africa) in 1936. This expansion was supported by propaganda delineating »a very specific

inheritance«, that of the »imperial dignity of ancient Rome« (Pes 2016, p. 251). This fascist colonial propaganda was considered »extremely systematic and pervasive« and includes public monuments and artwork such as the de Kuzmik Papini reliefs under inquiry here (Belmonte and Cecchini 2022, p. 328).

Latent in colonial policy was a racist foundation that has received considerable attention. The early liberal phase of colonialism was predicated on the paternalistic notion that the capture of African populations was necessary to elevate subjects »both morally and materially« (De Napoli 2013, p. 807). Under fascism, colonialism in the 1930s brought a new paradigm wherein subjects belonged »to a race that was and would remain biologically inferior« (De Napoli 2013, p. 823). This understanding of Africa and Africans born of the colonial experience would in turn »shape the Italian national consciousness« in ways that are not universally recognized or acknowledged (Zocchi 2019, pp. 3–4).

What is less known and studied are the gender aspects of Italian colonialism though there is growing scholarship in this area. Trento observed that the pre-fascist colonialism and that of the fascist period were characterized by »the factual and symbolic centrality of the relationship ›white man‹/›black woman‹« (2012, p. 3). She charts how practices of concubinage were present and widespread from the start of Italian colonialism in the Horn of Africa (2012). Debates around the relations between Italian men and African woman were a feature of colonialist practices, leading to racist legislation as well as »shaping the colonial imaginary« that »motivated Italian men to fight a war in a distant land« (Trento 2012, p. 3). Recent work has looked at the gendered colonial violence in Libya, where women experienced capture, confinement, imprisonment, torture, forced abduction, rape and concubinage (see Tarchi 2021). Women were targeted due to their »symbolic value and strategic importance to the resistance« and as a way to humiliate male kin (Yeaw 2018, p. 807). Acts such as abduction, according to Yeaw, »epitomised the relationship between power, gender and ethnicity under Italian rule, under which colonial men could physically claim the bodies of colonised women with impunity« (2018, p. 802). Fusari argues that delays in historical investigation have negatively affected the »analysis of violence against women perpetrated by Italians in the colonies, where female voices – colonialist and colonized – are feeble if not absent« (2020, p. 52).

Unfinished Decolonialism

With the defeat of fascism and surrender during World War II, Italy lost its colonial territories in Eritrea, Ethiopia, Somalia, Libya, the Dodecanese Islands, and Albania. The era of both fascist domination and colonial engagements were thus considered brief compared to other European imperialist powers, leading to the characterization of Italian decolonization as »quick, relatively unproblematic« (Ballinger, 2021, p. 18). Pinkus sees the process as having »contributed to the lack of a full-scale

national reevaluation of the country's colonial past« (2003). This amnesia has meant that »remembering, or forgetting, serves different national interests and cultural enclaves« (Ponzanesi 2012, p. 59). Further, the myth of the »good Italian« (*Italiani brava gente*) in official and societal discourse has sustained a narrative that deftly absolves Italians of their role in perpetrating Nazi and fascist crimes and instead reinforced their role as victims (Siddi 2020, p. 1036, see also Fogu 2006 and Focardi 2013). The diffusion of this romanticized narrative as a form of public memory has been implicated in the »arrested consciousness« that continues to thwart public memory and reckoning with Italy's past (Castiglioni 2022, p. 24). To some scholars, a full reckoning is still lacking, and racist legacies endure in different ways (Berhane 2020). Meanwhile, resistance to hegemonic narratives is difficult; Jedlowski points out that the colonial period's victims are primarily people of color, who have difficulty in constructing themselves as »memory entrepreneurs« (2012, p. 36).

However, there are signs of rising awareness of crimes committed by Italians in its colonies and over the course of World War II. Observers now recognize that »a process is now underway to constitute the colonial past as a cultural trauma« by historians (Jedlowski 2012, p. 37). The recent »post-colonial turn« in Italian studies has sought to identify the various ways in which racialization has been embedded within contemporary Italy through not only the legacies of colonialism but also emigration and global migration (Lombardi-Diop/Romeo 2012, p. 2). But Jedlowski finds that the public memory that persists »survives in the form of racism, which is a continuation of the ideological presuppositions that justify colonialism« (2012, p. 40); among the ways in which these persist, Jedlowski points to representations, which is the focus of our inquiry here.

Part of the slow reckoning with Italy's contentious engagement with its colonial past therefore has made heritage a touchstone for a variety of political and social conflicts, in particular the architectural fascist and colonial imprint on urban landscapes and former colonies. As a country, Italy places a high value on heritage, considered a vital part of nation-building identities, democratic citizenship, and more recently commercialization and urban structuring (Galbo 2019). Whereas Italy's colonial past may not be well known by the Italian public, the fact is that »colonial traces are everywhere« in the public arena, with squares, streets, and monuments named after key figures, places, and events of that period (Lombardi-Diop/Romeo 2012, p. 7–8). There have been a number of calls for interventions that suggest various historical legacies are being negotiated by an expanding roster of disenfranchised groups, including women and recently arrived migrants.

More recently, attacks on Italian heritage amid the ongoing Statue Wars and decolonial discussions have surfaced gendered dimensions of the country's fascist colonial legacies. An attack by the feminist collective *Non una di meno* on the statue of Indro Montanelli demonstrated the ways in which heritage is being used to focalize »debate against a hegemonic memory of the past« in particular around the

myth of the *Italia brava gente* described above (Lissi 2019). In an example of this dominant narrative, Montanelli was a journalist who had a well-known and controversial past as an Italian in Eritrea, having participated in the Abyssinian war in 1935 and for having entered into a relationship with a 12-year-old girl (Mandolini 2022). The use of pink paint by the feminist collective was a gendered variation on the red paint that had become ubiquitous as a tool of subversion and reclamation in the decolonization of public spaces (Garsha 2019, p. 79). Whereas the figure of Montanelli had always been controversial, he was now controversial in new ways related to post-colonialism and migration; as Scego argued, »Italy was changing again, and history illuminated aspects that were thought forgotten and assembles them back on center stage in an unexpected way« (undated). The pink hued tone of this particular episode in the statue wars signaled feminist resistance that aimed to bring to light the gendered violence of the fascist colonial period. This awareness-raising will be reflected in current activities around the de Kuzmik Papini reliefs in Bolzano-Bozen that also engage with the local context.

Recent Confrontations with Italy's Cultural Heritage in South Tyrol

Various episodes of heritage politics have also occurred in South Tyrol, a border region of mainly German and Ladin speakers that was once part of the Austro-Hungarian Empire, reflecting the ongoing reckoning of the region with its past history. While the decolonial focus has been on Italian colonial territories in Africa, there is also growing recognition of the ways in which »empire-building as part and parcel of the fascist culture and imagery« was imposed by the fascist regime on borderlands such as South Tyrol (Bresciani 2021, p. 120). Following World War I, the region came under the Reign of Italy and, a few years later when Benito Mussolini took power, under the fascist regime. Mussolini's brand of nationalism meant that the entire country including South Tyrol was to be Italianized (Grote 2012). Similar to the treatment of Italian colonies of Africa, in particular Libya, South Tyrol was a borderland where Fascist Italy took measures »to cement Italian sovereignty over territories that were not self-evidently Italian« (Pergher 2017, p. 22). Policies enacted in South Tyrol starting in 1923 included the abolition of the region's special status, the elimination of the German language, the introduction of Italian in official spheres and in schools in what was considered »a campaign of cultural cleansing« (see Fuller 2018). The architectural and structural installations of the fascist period reflect expansionist conquests as well as South Tyrol's role in Italy's empire-building (De Pretto 2023, p. 18) and traces of Africa (Steinacher 2008).²

In light of its complex conflictual past and ethnolinguistic divisions, South Tyrol is characterized by a heritage landscape that bears the indelible imprint of the fascist

2 See Steinacher (2006), de Pretto (2020), di Michele (2016).

past, which has led to contestation. This is evident in public debates around various cultural expressions such as museums, rituals, architecture, and toponyms where linguistic groups offer different interpretations of historical events (Budabin et al. 2024). De Pretto (2023) notes that the local newspapers, both Italian and German language, have engaged in debates on monuments that have become politicized. Notably, there have been official efforts to engage in dialogues and interventions to ›disempower‹ a few contentious monuments and buildings from the fascist period. A substantial intervention was implemented at the Victory Arch at the center of Piazza Vittoria (Steinbacher 2013, p. 653; Kofler Engl 2013; see also Di Michele 2020), in discussions that brought together experts with members from the Italian and German-speaking language groups to discuss the legacies of Nazism and fascism (Mitterhofer 2013; Angelucci/Kerschbamer 2017; Carlà/Mitterhofer 2017). Another example is the bas-relief on the front of the former Fascists Party Headquarters and now the Finance Office that recounted the narrative of the fascist Italian nation and featured Mussolini. Meanwhile, the Piazza Vittoria has been the site of other smaller-scale interventions such as art installations (Budabin 2023b). But overall, while there has been a focus on the city's legacies related to fascism and Nazism, there has been less attention to the ways in which this heritage landscape contains traces of Italy's colonial past as well as gender aspects connected to these periods.

Thus, there remain many features in the city's architectural landscape that connect with local and national historical legacies in Bolzano-Bozen, particularly if we move beyond the ›old antagonisms‹ between German and Italian speakers. Linked to statue wars and decolonial debates, recent shifts in Italy's complicated relationship with its colonial past have surfaced new sites of contention in the heritage landscape of South Tyrol as well as resistance from different parts of the population. This heritage politics is related to the arrival of ›new minorities‹ and subsequent increased diversity.³ In 2023, according to official estimates, nearly ten percent of the population in the province had foreign nationality⁴; in 2024, nearly nineteen percent of residence card holders are from Africa.⁵ The postcolonial consciousness in Italy that had been boosted by the Black Lives Matter movement was reinforced in South Tyrol through local protest episodes that drew connections between systemic racism and the region's colonial legacies (Budabin 2023a). The colonial fascist legacies in

3 https://www.provincia.bz.it/famiglia-sociale-comunita/integrazione/service/news.asp?News_action=4&News_article_id=674316 (accessed September 2025).

4 <https://astat.provincia.bz.it/it/popolazione.asp> (accessed September 2025).

5 ASTAT, Istituto provinciale di statistica ASTAT – Provincia Bolzano (accessed September 2025).

Bolzano-Bozen are also present on various counter-mapping efforts that map contentious heritage across Italy (Budasz/Wurzer 2023).⁶

The integration of the perspectives of ›new minorities‹ into local cultural heritage discussions has been minimal but this is slowly shifting (Budabin et al. 2024); an exhibit of an Ethiopian cloak acquired by an Italian general during the fascist period was used to open up dialogue on decolonialization.⁷ Meanwhile, deeper engagement on the gender aspects of the built environment is more recent and is a less developed phenomenon. One exception is a recent interview in a local media outlet on »monumental priapism«, which featured historian Hannes Obermair who noted the near absence of monuments of women apart from some allegorical and symbolic characterizations that include the de Papini reliefs (Di Luca 2020). Thus, what can be detected in the case of the Kuzmik Papini reliefs and their politicization is the beginning of a conversation, the raising of awareness through the lens of gender of uncomfortable associations and difficult legacies by both official and unofficial actors in the region of South Tyrol.

Case Study: Refracting Gender in the Livia De Kuzmik Papini Reliefs

A Hungarian Female Sculptor in Fascist Italy

The female sculptor Livia De Kuzmik Papini (1898–1976) who created the reliefs has a frustratingly short biographic record. However, it is evident that she reached a certain level of international importance as an artist. She was born into a prominent family in Budapest in 1898 and studied there and in London and Rome. Her work was exhibited at the Royal Academy in London as well as in international exhibitions in Paris, Copenhagen, Budapest, Madrid, Washington, Venice, Rio de Janeiro, Milan and Florence. Accounts of Livia Papini De Kuzmik Papini usually reference her more widely-known husband, the Italian architect, art historian, critic and teacher Roberto Papini, who was also her professor (Villa I Tatti 2024). During the Fascist period (1922–1943), Papini held important directorships at institutions such as the Museum of Arts and Industry (1928) and the Galleria Nazionale d'arte Moderna in Rome (1933). He was also a superintendent at the Italian Ministry of Foreign Affairs who oversaw the furnishing of embassies, consulates, and legations abroad from 1921–1926 (Villa I Tatti 2024).

6 See https://umap.openstreetmap.fr/it/map/viva-zeroi_519378#17/46.50223/11.33927 and <https://postcolonialitaly.com/bolzano-imperiale> (accessed September 2025).

7 H. Obermair & A. Karbe »The Ethiopian Cloak« Villa Freischütz, <https://www.villafreischuetz.org/en/the-cloak/> (accessed March 28, 2024).

That de Kuzmik Papini's art historical record is connected to her husband's should not surprise us nor should the fact that she is often described through her marital status. For example, a guidebook by the city of Bolzano-Bozen describes her as the artist Livia Papini, »moglie del noto storico d'arte Roberto Papini« (»wife of the famous art historian«);⁸ other mentions refer to her status as his second wife. Her archival materials are included as part of Papini's collection inventory at the Villa Tatti in Florence.⁹ The absence of a full historical record has been noted; her name is listed as part of a Wikipedia project called *Women in Red*, which identifies female figures who do not have articles.¹⁰

As a Hungarian artist married to an Italian, De Kuzmik Papini played a unique role in an artistic friendship of sorts between Italy and Hungary. Already in 1927, Mussolini had signed the Italian-Hungarian Treaty of Friendship, which invested each other as prime foreign policy partners. This cooperation was realized culturally in the exchange of gifts and artistic commissions recognizing their shared history. In 1931, she created a bust of the Brescian patriot Alessandro Monti who was a commander of the Italian Legion that participated in the Hungarian War of Independence (1818–1854). The bust stands in the garden of the National Museum in Budapest near a Roman Column from the Roman Forum that had been donated by the Italian nation in 1929 to commemorate the 80th anniversary of the War of Independence. The garden also contained a statue of Giuseppe Garibaldi and a replica of a statue of Apollo Belvederi that resides in the Vatican Museum. Hungary further emphasized its close ties with Italy and later Nazi Germany by renaming certain squares after Mussolini and Hitler (Miklós 2018).

The cultural exchanges between Italy and Hungary continued to deepen in the interwar period. The best representations of contemporary Hungarian art were purchased by Italy and used to decorate the ministries of Mussolini's Italy (Fehér 2017). Following the foundation of the Accademia d'Ungheria in Roma in 1928 where De Kuzmik Papini was a fellow, an exhibit called *Mostra d'arte Ungherese* was held at the Palazzo delle Esposizioni and included more than 379 works of art. Among these works chosen for political reasons was a piece made by Livia De Kuzmik Papini, a bas-relief depicting Mussolini, that was featured in the central hall.¹¹ In the same year, she created a two-sided bronze commemorative medallion for the »Benito Mussolini-Mathias Corvinus Society«, which featured a side-portrait of

8 https://issuu.com/landsuedtirol-provinciabolzano/docs/percorsi_di_storia_locale_-_unterwegs_in_der_lande/s/27059706 (accessed September 2025).

9 See »Roberto Papini and Livia de Kuzmic papers«, <https://hollisarchives.lib.harvard.edu/repositories/10/resources/701> (accessed September 2025).

10 https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Wikipedia:WikiProject_Women_in_Red/Missing_articles_by_occupation/Sculptors (accessed September 2025).

11 This work has remained in Italy and is in the Galleria Comunale d'Arte Moderna e Contemporanea di Roma.

Mussolini.¹² As a sign of her growing stature, De Kuzmik Papini participated in the Venice Biennials of 1930, 1932, and 1936 in the Hungarian sections and in 1938 and 1940, when she was included with the Italian artists.¹³ After the death of her husband, De Kuzmik Papini moved to the USA where was a visiting professor at Northwood University in Michigan. She died in 1976 in Florence.

A review of De Kuzmik Papini's sculptural output reflects trends related to public art that was primarily focused on mainly on men and allegorical female figures (Peruzzi et al. 2022). Her works spanned from notable men of history, and politics to metaphorical, religious, and often unnamed women. Examples of unnamed women include bronze medal representing a »Maiden in Profile« from 1920¹⁴ and a bronze sculpture entitled »Refugee Woman« that was dated to ca. 1935.¹⁵ An example of her allegorical work can be found in the Frontone Gardens in Perugia, where you can view a set of six stone statues of muses that represent painting, poetry, architecture, sculpture, theatre, and music.¹⁶ Women continued to be a motif for her in the post-World War II period.¹⁷ Her prominence in Italian art circles, her previous tribute to Mussolini, the relationship to Hungary, and her focus on female allegorical and symbolic figures likely explain why she was chosen to produce the female-inflected reliefs destined for the Piazza Vittoria in Bolzano-Bozen.

Representations of Women as Protectors, Colonizers, and Imperial Subjects

The de Kuzmik Papini reliefs are located in Piazza Vittoria, a symbolically rich area that is dominated by the Victory Arch that proclaimed the Italian conquest over the territory. Surrounding the arch and populating the piazza are state institutions, street signs that celebrate the military victories of the fascists in Abyssinia in 1935–1936, and friezes that further reflect the fascist era and colonial control over the region of South Tyrol and the architectural imprint on the urban makeover of Bolzano-Bozen. The reliefs can be seen as part of the »twofold message« that elided the fascist regimes' expansionist and colonial conquests as well as South Tyrol's

12 [https://www.darabanth.com/en/major-auction/39/categories Numismatics/Worldwide-commemorative-medallions-and-plaques 16146/Olaszorszag-1928-Benito-Mussolini-Corvin-Matyas-Tarsasag-ketoldalal-bronz-emlekerem-Sz II2740271](https://www.darabanth.com/en/major-auction/39/categories%20Numismatics/Worldwide-commemorative-medallions-and-plaques%2016146/Olaszorszag-1928-Benito-Mussolini-Corvin-Matyas-Tarsasag-ketoldalal-bronz-emlekerem-Sz%20II2740271) (accessed September 2025).

13 <https://asac.labiennale.org/persona/408100> (accessed September 2025).

14 <https://siusa-archivi.cultura.gov.it/cgi-bin/siusa/pagina.pl?TipoPag=prodpersona&Chiave=50259&RicProgetto=personalita> (accessed September 2025).

15 <https://uarizona.pastperfectonline.com/webobject/C7496D19-309F-43D5-8B23-420304395254> (accessed September 2025).

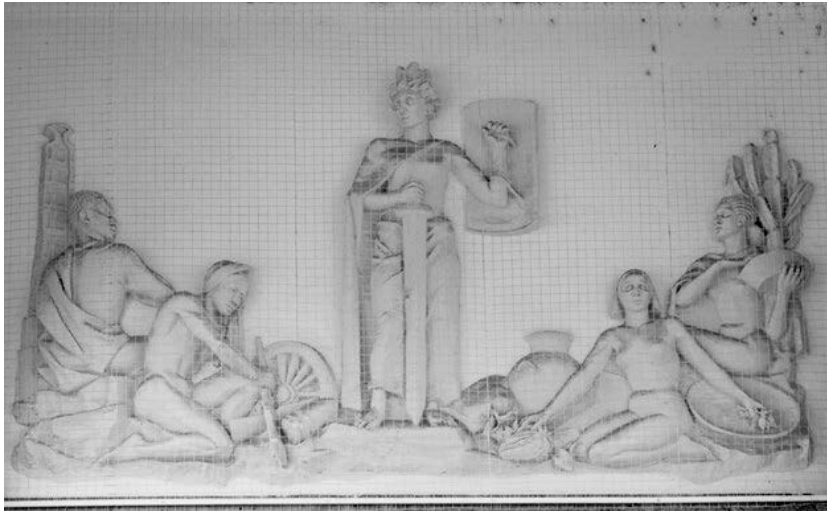
16 <https://www.umbriatourism.it/en/amp/-/amp/giardini-del-frontone-en> (accessed September 2025).

17 [www.tradere.info/artista.asp?id=3404&nome=de %20kuzmik %20opapini, %20olivia&lin=en](http://www.tradere.info/artista.asp?id=3404&nome=de%20kuzmik%20opapini,%20olivia&lin=en) g (accessed September 2025).

self-sacrifice amid the Italianization of the territory (De Pretto 2023, p. 18). Using a gender lens, we can see the extent to which ideas around femininity – of both colonial oppressors and subjects – were integrated into this message.

Amid the politically charged architectural landscape of the Piazza Vittoria, the de Kuzmik Papini's reliefs can be found on the northside of the square under the arched passageway that connected two buildings of the national insurance institute, the Istituto Nazionale delle Assicurazioni (INA), a public entity created in 1921 to provide social welfare. These reliefs were created and installed in 1936–1937, the same years in which Italy was forming its colony in the Horn of Africa. This connection of Italian's colonial supremacy is reinforced by the naming of the nearby street at Corso IX Maggio following the May 9th proclamation of Mussolini of the Italian Empire in East Africa in 1936 that culminated the Italian conquest of Ethiopia in 1935.

Fig. 1: West-facing relief⁸

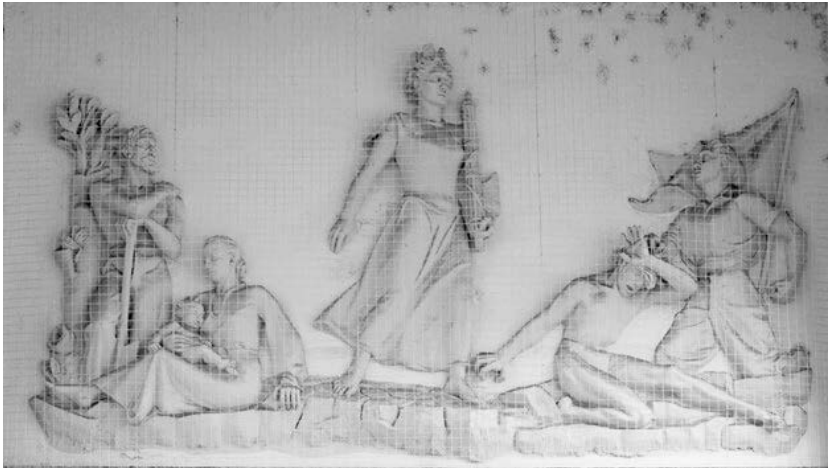


The west-facing relief on the left side with the subject of *Italia Turrita and Africa* features a central and elevated female figure; outfitted with a sword and shield, she is dressed in the attire of ancient Rome. She is also recognizable as the allegory of the *Italia Turrita*, a female figure wearing a crown of turrets, which makes her an even taller figure within the relief's frame. The allegory of the *Italia Turrita* harkens back to the mythology of ancient Rome and the individual figure represents the collective

18 https://issuu.com/landsuedtirol-provinciabolzano/docs/percorsi_di_storia_locale_-_unterwegs_in_der_landes/27059706 (accessed September 2025).

body of Italians (Bassi et al. 2023); the figure was diffused as part of Italy's iconography in the 19th century to symbolize the country's unity and victory. She stands in a protective stance and at her feet are various half-naked Africans engaged in various agricultural and farming pursuits. Kofler Engl argues that the scene is one of power relations: the white woman personifies Italy as well as the rule of Italy over the military, family, and North and East Africans under colonial rule (Kofler Engl 2021, p. 55).¹⁹ The reference to Africa is reinforced by the presence of the stele of Aksum in Ethiopia on the left side (Kofler Engl 2020, pp. 158–160); the Stele would be brought to Italy in 1937. The other side features a desert cactus, another sign that the *Italia Turrita* has traveled beyond Italy's borders.

Fig. 2: East-facing relief²⁰



Here, the feminine characteristics of motherhood—caring and protective—are marshalled at the service of a government seeking to justify its empire-building and colonialization. De Pretto describes the *Italia Turrita* as representing »a strong and liberating fascist Italian mother nation« (2023, p. 8). Further, the use of motherhood tropes has been shown as having an infantilizing effect; as

19 Translated from: »It is no coincidence that the reliefs depict the rule of the Italia over the military, the family and the subjugated ›foreign-born‹ North and East Africans who were to be colonized. The reference to the legitimate annexation and colonization of the Etschland was clear and also manifested itself in the renaming of today's Freiheitsstraße after the conquest of Addis Ababa.«

20 https://issuu.com/landsuedtirol-provinciabolzano/docs/percorsi_di_storia_locale_-_unter_wegs_in_der_lande/s/27059706 (accessed September 2025).

analyzed in humanitarian communications, it is the »North/South positioning of the enslaved and colonized as children who need »care« in the cloak of domination lingers behind an entrancing feminized beauty« (Richey/Brockington 2019). Thus, using a gender lens, we can see how the female figure of the *Italia Turrita* embodies a maternal figure as way to argue that the people of Africa are in need of protection and saving. The rendering serves to create an imaginary in which Italy's empire and colonialism were justified.

On the east-facing relief on the right side, we find again the central and elevated female figure personifying *Italia Turrita*. This time she is conveying the familiar *fascis* bundle, a symbol representing the civil and military authority of ancient Republic Rome that was appropriated by the fascists. She is in motion, striding over a scene of battle towards two men who represent the colonized and colonizer. We see on her right a male figure with African physiognomy in front of a standing male soldier, who gazes up at the woman with his hand in a belligerent fist, with a wafting flag behind him. As interpreted by Kofler Engl, the woman is passing over »a subjugated naked »foreigner« who turns away in shame in a dramatic pose where he shields his head with his left hand (2020, p. 159). The female figure embodies again the nation but this time as »Italia the Conqueror« who »dominates not only the military but also civilian life« (Kofler Engl 2020, p. 159). Femininity is put at the service of justifying military might and the need to conquer other peoples to protect the Italian nation.

An additional use of femininity can be found on the left side of the relief, where there is an Italian farming family; we see a man leaning on his spade while a woman sits below succoring a child. Pinzger described this aspect as »scenes from everyday life that emphasize the family and daily work« (2011, p. 72). Here, a woman is portrayed in the traditional caring role of mother to the next generation, reminding us that the reproductive worth of women is important for the sustaining of nations who need a steady supply of soldiers to wage war. This also reflects fascist efforts to construct gendered identities and roles among women (see Pickering-Iazzi 1995). Thus, this relief links fascists efforts both domestic and international, workers and soldiers as well as women in their reproductive capacities.

The message of the reliefs has also been contextualized within the mission of the Istituto Nazionale delle Assicurazioni. Dissertori connected the idyllic scene to the building's purpose, as »Insurance institutions guarantee a peaceful and carefree life, protection for family and property. They convey a harmonious and happy life under the care of a trustworthy institution« (1997, p. 50). This reference to protection of the harvest and bounty is emphasized in leafy tree seen in the left corner. But a further reading could also interpret the relief as honoring the role of the insurance institution in a newly colonized part of Italy, South Tyrol. Thus, the theme of subjugation under the female protective figure of *Italia* of not only the »external« colonies but also the »internal« can be gleaned.

Raising Awareness to the Gendered Aspects of the Reliefs

The reliefs may be somewhat hidden from public view, but recent efforts have forced the public's gaze to see them anew through a critical and often gendered lens. The reliefs have come under scrutiny by a local feminist collective but no action was taken. Various guided tours by local historians take a decolonial lens to the area of the Victory Monument and include stops at the reliefs. Moreover, for an audience beyond Bolzano-Bozen, the reliefs are included in the Postcolonial Italy mapping project with texts by the historian Sebastiano de Pretto.²¹ The most prominent examples of politicizing through awareness raising with a gender lens are two curricular guides that are available online.

In a first curricular guide written in English and Italian, OEW led a collaboration with local schools in Bolzano-Bozen and a school in Addis Ababa.²² As Adrian Luncke writes in the introduction, the guide was inspired by the BLM protest in Italy, when activists »requested once more stronger public awareness of the colonial past of the country, which would help get to the roots of the racist ideology« (OEW 2021, preface). The resulting book *De-colonising Minds: Tracing Italian colonial aggressions in Addis Ababa and South Tyrol* explored the colonial imprint on the two cities. The reliefs are included with brief and powerful descriptions. An essay on the Italian Colonial Project in Ethiopia touches briefly on the gender violence, referencing the Italians who »married young Ethiopian girls and gave birth to half castes« (Kassie 2021). The relief of *Italia Turruta* adopts a gender lens in speaking about the soldier's »remarkable devotion felt towards the Donna Italia« (Opre/Tripoli 2021). In the relief of *Italia Turruta in Africa*, students discuss the female figure personifying Italy, »while at her feet there are half-naked Africans kneeling« (Debertol/Prada 2021). The authors summarize that »the message is clear: Italians are the bearers of civilisation, work and progress in a land characterized by barbarism and poverty«. Offering a re-interpretation, the students warn that »today, however, we know that this was not the case: the sword and shield of Italy are a symbol of violence used to subjugate people that did not really need external intervention to »improve« them«. The OEW guide adopted a gender lens though its focus was on the decolonial lens more closely directed towards discussions linked to race.

The second example is *Victory Monument: Paths of Local History*, a German and Italian guide that was produced by the provincial government's Italian School Depart-

21 <https://www.google.com/maps/d/u/o/viewer?mid=1HARvilqZD7xoDrrDdqEiWhFORzozqv ez&femb=1&ll=46.50116100000002%2C11.34345360000001&z=13> (accessed September 2025).

22 More information on the project can be found in this article: <https://www.novecento.org/di dattica-in-classe/decolonising-minds-tracing-italian-colonial-aggressions-in-addis-ababa-and-south-tyrol-8164/> (accessed September 2025).

ment in 2022. The guide was written with the help of researchers and teachers with the goal to create a didactic course to analyze the history of the monument and its surroundings in the Piazza Vittoria through different lenses and foster dialogue on its symbolism. The goal is to promote «a critical and multi-perspective approach to the architecture of the places frequented almost daily encourages the development of personal skills that are important in the context of the processes of coexistence in a multicultural society.»²³ The reliefs by de Kuzmik Papini are featured in the guide in a few places.

In an exercise on »The Symbols of the Piazza Vittoria«, students are encouraged to look closely at the relief of the *Italia Turruta* and to describe the protagonists in terms of their stance, attire, facial expressions, and their positions within the relief. The students are told to keep in mind the ways in which the reliefs of the piazza were created to transmit coded messages. There is part of the exercise that draws attention to the female figure of the *Italia Turruta*, focusing on the figures to compare the stances of the *Italia Turruta* and the farmers, soldier, and the subjugated figure. A survey then asks students to choose an adjective to describe the figure either as impetuous and determined; nice and sociable; or elegant and smiling.²⁴ This reference to the *Italia Turruta's* elegance and attractive countenance is a reminder that dangerous messages are often transmitted under the guise of traditional femininity.

Another question asks what this figure represents, with the answer being »a fascist Italy«. Finally, the survey asks what the message being transmitted by the relief with the response being »fascist Italy is strong and it is right to work and fight for it.« Using a gender lens, the exercise makes a clear and direct connection between the use of a female allegory and nationalistic justifications for war as well as the efforts of workers. According to the guide, the relief suggests »Fascism would thus benefit all social classes, bringing together under the sign of the fascio littorio both those who work to sustain the homeland and those who fight to defend it from enemies foreign and domestic.«²⁵ Further, the guide connects the provenance of this work to Mussolini's quote, »it is the plow that draws the furrow, but it is the sword that defends it.«²⁶

In its discussion of the relief *Italia Turruta in Africa*, the guide presents the female allegory with her militant garb as one »who is preparing to defend her subjects and

23 https://issuu.com/landsuedtirol-provinciabolzano/docs/percorsi_di_storia_locale_-_unterwegs_in_der_lande/78 (pages 6–7, accessed September 2025).

24 https://issuu.com/landsuedtirol-provinciabolzano/docs/percorsi_di_storia_locale_-_unterwegs_in_der_lande/78 (page 58, accessed September 2025).

25 https://issuu.com/landsuedtirol-provinciabolzano/docs/percorsi_di_storia_locale_-_unterwegs_in_der_lande/s/27059706 (page 60, accessed September 2025).

26 https://issuu.com/landsuedtirol-provinciabolzano/docs/percorsi_di_storia_locale_-_unterwegs_in_der_lande/s/27059706 (page 60, accessed September 2025).

defeat her enemies.«²⁷ The guide also discussed the African women who are »filling bowls, jars and sacks with the freshly harvested grain.« The guide concludes that with this relief, »Fascism wanted to create the illusion of a supposed harmony and economic prosperity among the »civilized« African peoples thanks to fascist intervention.«²⁸ The guide's emphasis and contrast of the female allegory and her symbolism for the military might of Italy with the colonized woman's role of serving the state reflect a gender lens. Overall, the guide instills in students an accessible interpretative framework for understanding the ways in which symbols of femininity are serving the larger objectives of colonial fascist Italian state that include imperial practices of subjugation and exploitation and domestic practices of encouraging fertility and sacrifice.

Conclusions

This chapter uses the example of the heritage politics around a set of reliefs created by a female artist that used female representations as part of Italy's use of public art in its borderlands during the colonial fascist period. By adopting a gender lens, I unpacked the ways in which femininity is key to our understanding of the propagandistic uses and uncomfortable legacies of these reliefs. In exploring the biography of the reliefs' female artist, what emerges is a foxed record of an artist who is more well known as the wife of a prominent Italian art historian. Exploring the iconography of the reliefs themselves, we see how the female personifications of Italy and African women reflect and reinforce gender stereotypes around femininity, as well as masculinity. Comparing the female representations, we also gain an impression of the racialized notions of which female bodies mattered in the fascist colonial period. The women differ in their posture, attire, and expressions and their contrasts serve as part of the symbolism of the composition. Finally, to discuss how the reliefs are being politicized in today's climate, I examined two curricular guides that engaged a gender lens to reveal undercurrents of resistance, challenging and contesting the legacies of these reliefs. This research underscores how the imaginaries created during the colonial fascist period are entrenched in the heritage landscape and may influence understandings of gender, and further race. Therefore, applying a gender lens to this heritage becomes part of the resistance to these legacies, enabling us to surface the histories of gendered violence and notions of nationalism masked under the guise of femininity that remain embedded in the heritage landscape.

27 https://issuu.com/landsuedtirol-provinciabolzano/docs/percorsi_di_storia_locale_-_unterwegs_in_der_lande/78 (page 61).

28 https://issuu.com/landsuedtirol-provinciabolzano/docs/percorsi_di_storia_locale_-_unterwegs_in_der_lande/78 (page 61).

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