

RESEARCH ARTICLE

The Mussolini Collection: dispersal, historical erasure and public uses of the material memory of Fascism in Italy

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Abstract

This article analyses the story behind a vast collection of personal objects, furnishings, books, photographs and documents belonging to Benito Mussolini and his entourage. Most of these items were dispersed after the war, revealing how the collective memory of fascism was caught between historical erasure, preservation and reuse. Following the collapse of the Italian Social Republic and the end of the war, the assets were transferred from Lake Garda to the Monti Riuniti di Credito su Pegno in Brescia. Considered historically and artistically insignificant but potentially dangerous as objects of worship, the authorities swiftly eradicated them in the early 1950s for fear that they might affect public opinion, which oscillated between authoritarian nostalgia and the exoneration of Fascism. Studying these objects can provide valuable insights into the cultural identity, aesthetic preferences and daily life of Mussolini and his inner circle, offering a better understanding of the internal dynamics of power management at the heart of the regime.

Keywords: Fascism; historical erasure; material memory; Mussolini Collection; difficult heritage

Introduction

In recent years, public and academic debates on the memory of Fascism in Italy have intensified. This trend has been driven by a growing body of research and increasing interest not only in political and social issues, but also in urban, monumental, artistic and toponymic aspects. The presence of difficult heritage in public spaces (i.e. symbols, place names and monuments associated with the *ventennio*) has sparked many discussions, raising questions about its meaning, permanence and potential reuse or erasure. Some of these themes were analysed in a special issue of *Modern Italy* published in 2019, which analysed the *case del fascio* (Storchi 2019; Maulsby 2019) and monuments dedicated to Italo Balbo (Carter 2019), among other topics. The theme of controversial places of memory in Italy and Europe amid fractures, discontinuities, silences and erasure was subsequently brought to the fore in a book edited by Giulia Albanese and Lucia Ceci (2022). More recently, attention has extended to smaller urban contexts, as in the case of studies on the urban ‘fascistisation’ of Brescia (Carter 2023).

One aspect of the wide-ranging debate on the legacies of Fascism is inherently important but has received limited historiographical interest: the material memory of Fascism, conveyed through the objects owned and used by the regime's protagonists. Often considered to have no historical or artistic value, these materials were typically relegated to the realm of private collecting and even fetishism. Consequently, they were absorbed into alternative circuits, such as the predominantly clandestine antiques market. Yet it is precisely these objects and their fate – be it destruction or preservation, dispersal or collection – that can shed light on the internal dynamics of the public (and private) memory of Fascism in the years following its demise.

Bearing this in mind, the article traces the history of the so-called Mussolini Collection, comprising hundreds of objects, furnishings, paintings, books, photographs and documents that belonged to Benito Mussolini, his family and the group of Fascists surrounding him. After the demise of the Italian Social Republic (*Repubblica Sociale Italiana*, RSI), these materials were gradually transferred from Lake Garda to a pawnbroking institution in Brescia, the *Monti Riuniti di Credito su Pegno*. The collection represented what remained after numerous dispersals that occurred in the immediate postwar period, sometimes due to negligence, other times to misappropriation or outright theft. The 'surviving' items suffered different fates: some were preserved and deposited in institutional locations, but most were transferred, sold or destroyed. While this decision was sometimes based on the (presumed) lack of any historical or artistic value of the individual pieces, there was also a fear that they could become objects of worship for nostalgics. This concern did not only apply to material goods or symbolic artefacts, but also to the management of Mussolini's body, which became a politically cumbersome object after the war, first seized by fanatics and then 'hidden' by the state for over a decade, precisely to prevent it from becoming a relic. The story of 'the Duce's body' clearly reveals that erasure, concealment and dispersal were key to the difficult public management of the Fascist legacy (Luzzatto 1998).

Until now, the events surrounding the Mussolini Collection have received little attention. Analysing them therefore provides an excellent opportunity to reflect not only on the complex relationship between material reality and historical interpretation, but also on the processes by which the memory of Fascism and its main proponents were constructed and deconstructed in postwar Italy.

The RSI and the origins of the Mussolini Collection

The RSI was established in northern Italy between September 1943 and April 1945, after the Cassibile armistice and the German occupation of central and northern Italy. Many offices, ministries and private residences of Fascist gerarchs were established on the shores of Lake Garda. Led by Mussolini, who was freed by the Germans after his arrest on 25 July 1943, the RSI was a puppet state under the effective control of the Third Reich (De Felice 1997; Avagliano and Palmieri 2017; Osti Guerrazzi 2012; Chiarini 2009).

Geographical reasons led to the choice of Salò, on the western shore of Lake Garda, as the seat of the newly formed state. After Germany annexed Trentino-Alto Adige and much of the upper Lake Garda area, the Reich's borders were extended to Limone, just 20 km from Gargnano – Mussolini's place of residence. The area was relatively easy to reach and defend. In addition, the presence of numerous hotels, health clinics, elegant villas and comfortable private residences ensured ideal facilities for the Italian and German ministries, administrative offices, gerarchs and officers. Salò and its riviera thus became the centre of political and administrative control of late Fascism. Between 1943 and 1945, thousands of people moved to the Garda area, mainly civil servants, employees and military personnel, most of whom came from Rome (Chiarini and Cuzzi 2007).

The RSI was a last-ditch effort to keep fascism alive in a radically changed context, marked by civil war, growing political repression, racial persecution and the intensification of armed conflict between the partisan forces, the co-belligerent national army, the German troops and RSI soldiers. Its existence came to an end with the defeat of the Axis forces in Italy and Mussolini's capture and execution on 28 April 1945 on Lake Como, near Dongo, after the Duce had left his residence in Gargnano sul Garda on 18 April 1945 (Poggio 1986; Burgwyn 2018; Franzinelli 2020; Chiarini 2004; Bocca 1994; Deakin 1962).

All sorts of materials were found in the various villas once occupied by Mussolini, his family, other Fascist gerarchs and top Nazi authorities in Italy at the time of their defeat: written documents, furnishings, artworks and personal items of material and symbolic value. These were often left behind in a hurry as events unfolded quickly. Following the collapse of the Fascist regime, most of these assets were seized at random by retreating military units, individual officials, local civilians and the Allied forces (Festa 2018). Only a small part was preserved and relocated to Brescia via official channels.

The archival heritage

What remained of Mussolini's personal and family possessions, which were looted and removed – with or without authorisation – in the days immediately following the end of the war, was transferred to the main branch of the Monti Riuniti di Credito su Pegno in Brescia, located in Piazza della Loggia. This collection of objects formed the basis of the future Mussolini Collection, whose history reflects the complex interplay of preservation and erasure that characterised the Italian postwar period (Kondo 1995).

The documentary and archival material deserves special attention. A substantial part of the documentation produced by the Fascist regime was acquired by the Allied Military Government (AMG) after the fall of the RSI. There is ample evidence of these operations in the lists preserved in the British and US archives at the Central State Archives in Rome (Garofalo 2013). As early as February 1945, the Political Department of the British Foreign Office had taken custody of Mussolini's Roman archives, previously located at the Ministry of the Interior in Rome. This collection was divided into three main sections: a General Archive, a Confidential Archive and a Secret Military Archive.¹

At the same time, some of the archives belonging to the retreating Fascist administration had been transferred to the North in 1943 and relocated to the RSI's reconstituted ministries and offices on Lake Garda and certain cities in northern Italy. When the RSI disintegrated at the end of April 1945, these materials were abandoned and subsequently taken over by the Allies, who deposited them at their headquarters in Caserta. A detailed report dated 24 May 1945 documents the creation of a *Preliminary Catalogue of Documents Found in the Mussolini Villa*. It provides direct evidence of the first systematic attempt to catalogue and classify the material found in the Duce's residences.²

Everyday objects

The AMG also turned its attention to materials that were not strictly documentary in nature, and which were considered to be of lesser strategic and political importance. For instance, it took charge of the remains of the offices of the German and Japanese embassies. In the latter case, these included furnishings such as a complete dining room set, typewriters and personal belongings of the ambassador.³ Particularly interesting is the list of items seized from Villa Leonesio in Salò, which was one of the Mussolini family's residences during the RSI. In this case, the Allies compiled an inventory that is a useful – albeit limited – source for reconstructing not only postwar confiscation practices, but also the domestic environment of the Duce's family, offering significant insights into the material memory

of Fascism.⁴ The list includes nine paintings, as well as 53 packages containing books, marble busts, Chinese vases and mirrors. Captain Deane Keller of the Monuments Fine Arts and Archives described them as follows: '[S]ome value however there is nothing of National importance to the Italian.'⁵ There was also a portrait of Mussolini by the British painter Frank O. Salisbury (estimated to date from the early 1930s), which has recently appeared on the internet and is likely to be available on the online antiques market (Appendix 1).⁶

In October 1944, the Court of Rome appointed Ercole Chiri – a lawyer – as the sequestator and custodian of all the movable and immovable property that had previously belonged to Mussolini and his family, wherever it was located. Subsequently, the Court of Milan confirmed this provision and appointed two more lawyers, Carlo Mauri and Anton Maria Fabiani, to assist Chiri, who began working on Lake Garda in September 1945.⁷ Meanwhile, Libero Dordoni, the commissioner of the Ministry of the Interior responsible for reorganising the central administration in the North, authorised the delivery of a new inventory listing 38 items corresponding to 'objects, paintings and furniture' to Mauri. It contained a very brief description, which stated that they had been recovered from Lake Garda and identified as property belonging to the Mussolini and Petacci families (Appendix 2).⁸

In these cases, the description provides details that could help identify a small number of items subsequently listed in a 1947 document. This five-page inventory was initially kept at the Monti Riuniti di Credito su Pegno and is now stored in the Banca Intesa Historical Archive in Milan. While we cannot definitely trace most of the materials mentioned in Appendices 1 and 2 back to the Monti Riuniti list, it is likely that many of the items were included in it: for example, bound copies of the *Divina Commedia* and, in terms of artworks, probably also the portrait of Mussolini attributed to Frank O. Salisbury. The list includes various types of objects belonging to Mussolini and other members of his family; not counting the lost items, this is all that remained of the dictatorship (*List of furniture and various furnishings deposited by lawyer Luigi Ghirardi as sequestator of the Mussolini family's assets Brescia 25 November 1947*).⁹

Between 28 November 1946 and 1 June 1948, the materials collected in the Garda area were transferred to Brescia on multiple occasions. They were stored at the Monti Riuniti di Credito su Pegno until 1949, occupying a total of ten rooms.¹⁰ The list of items included a wide range of objects: carpets, armchairs, chairs, tables, cabinets, sofas, cushions, frames, wall mirrors, wardrobes, bedside tables and beds, as well as ceramic tableware comprising plates, soup tureens, bowls and saucers. There were also bottles, trophies, statuettes, photographs and paintings, although these had not been given a precise description. Most notably, there were nine boxes containing approximately 1,400 books and magazines, as well as three leather-bound editions of the *Divina Commedia* (Appendix 3).

It is worth highlighting an anomaly in the lists currently available. A newspaper article mentions the existence of an inventory of Benito Mussolini's assets confiscated in Brescia, describing it as consisting of '72 typed pages' and comprising '1,154 items' (*Corriere della Sera* 1950b). The inventory contained a wide range of items:

[W]riting desks, wardrobes, armchairs, cushions, folding screens, parchments, a leather belt adorned with nine metal plates, film projectors, a king-size walnut bed without a bedframe crossbar, a Madonnina del Duomo statue, a pair of combat boots, a statuette of a German officer on horseback with a broken tail and foot, as well as an inkstand with the stamp of *Il Popolo d'Italia*.

As the newspaper noted, the objects 'are lined up in numerical order like random junk in a second-hand shop'. However, there is no trace of this extensive inventory in the file dedicated to the Mussolini Collection at the Monti Riuniti archive. Instead, there is an inventory

of 'only' five typed pages. Furthermore, some of the items mentioned in the *Corriere della Sera* article do not appear in the list available today; this documentary discrepancy suggests that a more extensive inventory is likely to have existed.

The Monti Riuniti archivists saw the assets deposited in Brescia not as heritage with potential historical significance, but as an obstacle to regular institutional use of the spaces. Over the following years, they repeatedly addressed the Intendenza di Finanza – the state revenue office that had succeeded the previous sequestrators as custodian on 16 March 1946 – to request the release and return of the occupied spaces. The issue was so important that it even involved the prefecture of Brescia.¹¹ At the time, the challenges of the postwar era were still having a strong impact on the social and economic landscape, and many citizens were forced to pawn their belongings – particularly bicycles, as explained by the president of Monti Riuniti in a letter to the Intendenza.¹²

The president communicates that, following the continuous and constant increase in the number of bicycles being pawned, as already reported on previous occasions, the Monti is about to exhaust all possibilities of accepting these items unless it regains possession of the premises temporarily ceded to the local Intendenza di Finanza for the storage of goods that belonged to Mussolini. He points out that if the current situation continues, this administration will be forced to suspend the acceptance of bicycles within a matter of days, causing serious hardship for working-class citizens, who rely on pawning this item to meet their most pressing needs.¹³

Frustrated by the stalemate and with no response from the Intendenza, the Monti Riuniti di Credito su Pegno eventually turned to the press to raise public awareness of the problem.

The role of the press

In the second half of the 1940s, during the delicate period of democratic transition, the public perception and description of Fascism was marked by ambivalence, cultural resistance and fears of political instability. Although the previous regime was perhaps not considered legitimate, there was a subtle tendency to see it as a guarantor of order and stability, which were considered reassuring qualities. This resulted in a selective and simplified memory devoid of genuine critical analysis, which favoured processes of repression and prevented Italians from coming to terms with their experience of the dictatorship, guiding public debate for decades to come (Bartolini 2022).

In general, the press adopted an attitude towards Fascism and its protagonists that was, if not benevolent, then at least tolerant, sometimes caricatural and subtly ironic (Baris 2018; Allotti 2012; Baldassini 2008). This applies not only to magazines considered moderate by the historical community (Dematteis 2022) – such as *L'Uomo qualunque*, *Candido* and *Il Borghese*, edited by Guglielmo Giannini, Giovannino Guareschi and Leo Longanesi, and published from 27 December 1944, 15 December 1945 and 15 March 1950 until 1956, respectively – but also to more mainstream publications, such as *Corriere della Sera*, *La Stampa* and local newspapers. This attitude, which emerged from the vocabulary, topics of discussion and choice of news items, reflected a broader disposition in postfascist society. It was a stylistic feature common to various newspapers in their coverage of the dictatorship and its tragic consequences, which often bordered on trivialisation.

The fall of the regime had triggered conflicting reactions. Alongside a minority of nostalgics and a politically active group that had supported the Resistance and the nascent Republic, a larger and more heterogeneous section of the population held moderate beliefs. While not expressing any ideological attachment to Fascism, this group viewed the new institutional order with suspicion.

As Emilio Gentile has observed, a kind of ‘retroactive defascistisation’ of Fascism occurred: an indulgent, almost absolving approach that denied its very existence as a coherent ideological and political system. In some ways, Fascism was presented as a long-running theatrical farce, softened by a ‘mild’ and essentially harmless authority until it was ‘corrupted’ by the alliance with Nazi Germany (Gentile 2002, VII; Focardi 2005). In a 1950 article published in *Corriere della Sera*, Indro Montanelli – a former Fascist supporter – went so far as to interpret both fascist and antifascist adherence ironically and psychologically, claiming that they responded more to a need for heroic identification – and even a desire to please the female imagination, supposedly attracted to ‘unfortunate heroes’ – than to a conscious political choice. Taking his cue from a parade of nostalgic Fascists held in Rome that same year, the journalist downplayed and trivialised the deep motivations of both those who had supported the regime and those who had participated in the Resistance (*Corriere della Sera* 1950a).

In this context, it is worth noting the widespread attention that the accidental discovery of Mussolini’s possessions received in the national press between late March and September 1950. The main daily newspapers covered the story mainly using a sensationalist and anecdotal tone. Rather than discussing the historical and political value of the material, they emphasised its curious and picturesque qualities, presenting the assets not as evidence to be interpreted critically, but as relics of a past with almost caricature-like and grotesque features. The following passages, taken from articles published in those years, illustrate the irony and subtle sarcasm present in these accounts.

Equipped with collection warrants, US Army drivers repeatedly showed up at Villa Paccagnella in Gargnano, some apartments in Salò and Villa Leonesio alle Zette. The Allied transports never left these sites empty-handed, as most of Mussolini’s furnishings were stored here. One day, a truck stopped in front of Villa Leonesio. The driver presented an order for the collection of Mussolini’s king-size bed: a Baroque-style walnut bed from Rocca delle Caminate. Had it not been for someone’s shrewdness in saddling the unsuspecting American driver with a bed belonging to one of Mussolini’s servants, and not the former Duce himself, the Rocca bed would now be on display in a New York antique shop instead of being kept at the Monte di Pietà in Brescia. (*Corriere d’informazione* 1950)

The objects were recovered in 1946 without ceremony or publicity to prevent greedy hands from coming forward to claim them, especially Americans, who were very eager to acquire such memorabilia... (*La Stampa* 1950a)

The surprising discovery of the large Brescia collection challenges the widely held belief that Mussolini’s memorabilia had been dispersed almost completely in the months following 25 April 1945. In addition to most of the furniture from Rocca delle Caminate and Villa Torlonia, the premises of Monte di Pietà house Mussolini’s personal writing desks, the inkwell from *Popolo d’Italia*, the pen from the hideout in Via Paolo da Cannobio, the sword given to him by the Regent of Hungary, his personal violin, some tennis rackets and a photograph of all the members of the Grand Council, each with their own autograph, including that of Guglielmo Marconi. (*La Gazzetta del popolo* 1950)

This approach is part of a broader attempt to domesticate memory, in which the material remains of Fascism – despite being imbued with political significance – are gradually

weakened and turned into *souvenirs politiques*. As a result, they lose their ability to stimulate critical reflection on an embarrassing part of the nation's history. At the same time, the public debate in republican Italy failed to acknowledge the origins of these materials, instead relegating them to the 'colourful' realm of journalism. In sum, there was a tendency to neutralise and depoliticise fascism (and antifascism), which contributed to trivialisation and, with hindsight, encouraged forms of culpable amnesia that were destined to weigh heavily on the relationship between Italian society and its dictatorial past.

A commission of experts

In March 1950, the press attention surrounding the Mussolini Collection put increasing pressure on local and central institutions. Likewise, the Monti Riuniti di Credito su Pegno continued to complain about how much space it was taking up. Therefore, a decision on the fate of the materials could no longer be postponed. Forced to address the issue, Brescia's Intendenza di Finanza contacted various state bodies responsible for the liquidation of assets. At the end of February 1950, Emilio Re, the Inspector General of the State Archives of Brescia, conducted an inspection at Monti Riuniti and promised a solution to the problem.¹⁴

In April 1950, a commission of experts was set up to assist the Intendenza in liquidating the Mussolini Collection and deciding on a new destination. The commission was appointed by the prefect of Brescia and chaired by a representative of the Intendenza, D. Guggino, the director of the State Archives of Brescia and the director of the municipal art museum. Following an evaluation of the assets – based also on consultations with antique dealers who had ruled out their artistic value – and amid pressure to vacate the occupied premises, it was decided that only the non-alienable objects should be transferred.¹⁵ The archival and bibliographic material, on the other hand, was sent to the Central State Archives in Rome, arriving on 7 July 1950 in 22 sealed crates.

At the same time, Giovanni Teodorani Fabbri – the son-in-law of Mussolini's brother and heir to part of the Mussolini estate – filed a petition for the return of certain movable property and books that he believed belonged to his family. Thorough legal checks were carried out, also involving the state attorney's office. After careful examination, the Teodorani family eventually received those assets considered to be exclusively private property, whereas material deemed to be of significant historical and political interest remained in the possession of the Central State Archives. This decision meant that the bibliographic resources of the Mussolini Collection were permanently incorporated into the holdings of the Central State Archives. On 11 August 1950, the premises of the Monti Riuniti di Credito su Pegno were finally vacated, much to the satisfaction of the management, who had worked hard to recover the debts owed: 272,000 lire in rent and various other expenses. The sum was only paid on 24 July 1952 by the Intendenza di Finanza.¹⁶

The dispersal of the collection

As Guggino stated in his report of May 1950, the commission's proposals primarily concerned the subdivision of the materials. The members agreed that it would be better to sell those assets falling within the category of furniture and common objects, but to do so in a discreet and confidential manner to avoid possible exploitation by people nostalgic for the regime: 'It seems perfectly clear that the option of a public auction or even a private tender should be ruled out, so as not to cause more of a stir than there already is and to avoid inevitable political repercussions.' The sale was therefore initiated 'without formal deeds of sale, not only to avoid the delays and hesitations that such a procedure would entail, but also and above all to grant the operations the confidentiality deemed indispensable for the political considerations mentioned above'. In September, the press reported on the sale

of objects and memorabilia belonging to Mussolini: *Corriere della Sera* (1950b) incorrectly called it an ‘auction’, while *La Stampa* (1950b) more accurately described it as an ‘immediate disposal, through a sale by tender between individuals or entities wishing to make purchases’.

Moreover, the commission recommended that a large part of the furniture be transferred to the Istituto Artigianelli in Brescia, a religious charitable organisation providing vocational training to young people (focusing on disadvantaged youth). It would renovate the furniture and then resell it. The Monti Riuniti di Credito su Pegno, on the other hand, would purchase the furniture already in its custody, as it claimed to need it for its offices. This would ‘dehistoricise’ the objects, thus depriving them of any reference to their origin. A different approach was adopted for the materials considered to be of more historical significance; the commission decided that the bibliographic and archival documentation should be transferred to Rome.

With regard to the paintings, Professor Scrinzi – director of Brescia’s art museum and a member of the commission – ruled out that the collection included works by famous artists or of artistic value such as to justify their relocation to national galleries. Hence, it was decided to separate the portraits of Mussolini and his family members

to set them aside and store them in the premises of the Palazzo degli Uffici Finanziari, pending a decision by the relevant authorities on their possible return to the heirs or any other destination that may be deemed advisable – at an appropriate time and if, and insofar as, deemed compatible with the political situation in the country.¹⁷

In reality, some of these portraits probably had at least historical and documentary importance, and should therefore have been preserved. Instead, they were likely returned to the Mussolini family or irretrievably lost. The other paintings were entrusted to the custody of the art museum in Brescia. They were to be used as decorations in important state offices in the province and should have been recorded in their respective inventories in accordance with the applicable regulations. However, it is difficult to ascertain this today.

Several pieces from the Mussolini Collection were deposited at the Civic Museums of Brescia, including a reproduction of the *Tabula Peutingeriana* from the Austrian National Library and a box with a Japanese inscription. The latter contained seven papyri, four of which depict the seasons, two folding screens with a gold background depicting cormorants on a rock, and a colour painting on silk depicting a Japanese samurai on horseback with a flag bearing a swastika. These were added to the collection of Japanese objects already present in the Civic Museums, a gift from Count Fè d’Ostiani. The Japanese pieces were exhibited in 1995, in an exhibition entitled ‘Japanese Paintings in Brescia. The Oriental Collection of the Civic Museums of Art and History’ (Kondo 1995, 113 and 142).

Subsequent studies

Attitudes towards the material memory of Fascism changed in subsequent years. In 1979, for example, the Monti Riuniti di Credito su Pegno uncovered a silver box belonging to Mussolini, which had probably been left behind in 1950. The institute reported the find to the relevant authorities and awaited official instructions; it specified that the reason for doing so was not the object’s artistic or commercial value, but rather its historical significance in relation to the recipient.¹⁸ After an extensive exchange of letters, the box was sent to the Secretariat of General Affairs of the Quirinale with a note from the institute’s management, saying that they were ‘confident that they had faithfully complied with the instructions received’.¹⁹

Overall, attention towards these objects was changing. After another period of silence, studies focusing on the preserved materials emerged in the following decades. As L. De Felice observed in a 1983 essay dedicated to the Mussolini Collection preserved at the Central State Archives in Rome, just a few decades after the fall of the regime, the damage caused to historical research by the dispersal and poor valorisation of the assets belonging to the Duce and his family was already plain to see (De Felice 1983). In particular, De Felice highlighted the documentary value of seemingly insignificant details, such as underlining, annotations or dedications. These material traces could have been useful tools for reconstructing the cultural tastes, relational networks and daily interests of the regime's leader and ruling group. Public memory never managed to fill these gaps. The result is a missed opportunity not only on a material level, but also – and above all – on an intellectual level, depriving historiography of tools that would have been invaluable for a more complete and critical analysis of Mussolini's life.

It was only in the 1980s that the bibliographic material of the Mussolini Collection in the Central State Archives was systematically catalogued and studied. This occurred within a historiographical context that was more critical of Fascism. The volumes were thus recognised as historical sources, in particular because of the presence of Mussolini's handwritten annotations. The latter gave insight into his interests, reading preferences, judgements and critical positions, offering a significant contribution to the understanding of his cultural formation and ideological horizon (De Felice 1983).

In the 1990s, the aforementioned exhibition organised in Brescia drew attention to the presence – within the civic collections – of Japanese artworks from the Mussolini Collection. The introductory essay in the exhibition catalogue highlighted the artistic and stylistic aspects of the paintings and objects on display. However, the description of the papyri acquired in 1950 also included an account of their provenance, thus bringing to light a now almost forgotten story: that of the transfer and dispersal of Mussolini's possessions, some of which ended up in public collections in Brescia. Hence, the exhibition not only recovered the memory of a little-known chapter in the city's museum history, but it also became part of a broader climate of renewed historiographical and cultural interest in the *ventennio*, encouraging new studies and critical analyses (Kondo 1991, 1995; Araguás Biescas 2012).

It is not possible to establish in detail what happened to the material legacy of Fascism after the dispersals, thefts and depoliticisation operations that marked its course. Apart from the objects that ended up in public institutions, the rest are likely to be scattered among public offices, private collections and an active collectors' market. The most valuable pieces were probably stolen first, and are unlikely to ever be found. Artistic objects, in particular, would have helped to better define Mussolini's 'cultural personality', understood as a collective construction and a political device at the service of propaganda. This seems to be the recurring fate of the material remains of dictatorships once they have ended. However, the case of Mussolini's library shows that systematically preserving such assets could provide a valuable tool for examining the private dimension of power, thus complementing official sources in the attempt to understand the 'everyday life' of a dictatorship (Kertzer 1988; Falasca-Zamponi 1997).

The lists and materials available today do not allow us to draw definitive conclusions about the size and overall composition of the collection that belonged to Mussolini, his family and his inner circle. Hence, we can only make some hypothetical assumptions. Nonetheless, it should be noted that a significant portion of the objects was selected and transferred to Lake Garda directly by Mussolini and members of his family, which suggests a personal preference and affection, as well as a desire for representation. Indeed, the recurring presence of personal portraits – including by renowned artists – seems to

indicate a deliberate construction and dissemination of the Duce's public image, possibly reflecting a pronounced cult of personality and a drive to control his self-representation. This is consistent with the presence of a large number of awards, certificates and military decorations.

In addition to these personal artefacts, the collection included Chinese and Japanese objects and artefacts, revealing an interest in Orientalist art and taste. This was probably in line with the widespread fashion and sensibilities of the Italian elite during the *ventennio*, but it also implies closer diplomatic ties, such as those with Japan. Then there are paintings and decorative objects that reveal a preference for Italian landscapes, both rural and urban. These works contain references to cities such as Milan and Genoa, which are indicative of an idealised national vision. Finally, the everyday objects we know of do not seem to suggest a particularly luxurious or refined lifestyle, but we must bear in mind that more valuable and precious items may have been stolen or lost during the events of 1945 and the immediate postwar period.

Conclusion

The story of the Mussolini Collection illustrates how, in the 1950s, objects belonging to the Duce were regarded primarily as a political and administrative problem rather than as a source of knowledge. The press contributed to creating an ambivalent image of these assets: considered useless for a deeper historical understanding of the regime and its private dimension, but simultaneously deemed to be potentially dangerous, as they were likely to fuel nostalgic fetishism or ideological beliefs. In this climate, it was decided to preserve the more 'institutional' items (e.g. books, photographs and magazines) and to disperse or neutralise the rest. Some of the materials were sold off, while others were 'depoliticised' and stripped of all references to their Fascist origins, as in the case of the furniture sent to the Istituto Artigianelli. This was only apparently a technical operation; it actually reflected a broader strategy of managing collective memory in the postwar era, aimed at removing symbolic elements and preventing their political reuse.

The result was twofold. On the one hand, it meant the irreversible loss of a possible source for the historical study of everyday Fascist life and its leading figures, starting with Mussolini himself, seen in a personal, private but also cultural dimension. On the other hand, it consolidated an attitude of historical erasure, reflecting – and at the same time fuelling – the difficulties of Italian society in coming to terms with its dictatorial past. In this sense, the Mussolini Collection is not only emblematic of the management of the material legacy of Fascism; it also serves as a warning. It shows how decisions to silence the historical value of objects can contribute to perpetuating forms of collective amnesia, preventing the development of a more conscious public memory.

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Consulted archives

TNA	The National Archives – London
ASI	Archivio Storico Intesa Sanpaolo (Intesa Sanpaolo Historical Archive) – Milan

ACS Archivio Centrale dello Stato (Central State Archives) – Rome
 ACBS Archivio di Stato (State Archive) – Brescia

Notes

1. The National Archives (hereafter TNA), FO, 371/49932, Report n. 3, Additional Files from the Villa of Mussolini, 25 May 1945.
2. TNA, FO, 371/49932, Report n. 2, Preliminary catalogue of documents found in the Mussolini Villa, 24 May 1945.
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5. ACS, Fondo ACC, reel 1498 B, Deposit of belongings of Vittorio Mussolini, letter of Deane Keller to CAO of Salò Cap. D. Goodman, 5 September 1945.
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Appendix I (September 1945)

INVENTORY OF MUSSOLINI PROPERTY

(Villa Leonisio, Salò)

PAINTINGS:

- 1) Portrait of Mussolini (3 x 4) by Medina 1930
- 2) Pountain [sic] scene (5 x 3.5) by Weeerbeg [sic]
- 3) Shipyard study (5 x 6) by Kyttleuser
- 4) The Sower (Il Seminatore) (7 x 5) by Tommaso Della Volpe d'Imola

- 5) Torre di Bruno (4 x 5)
- 6) Royal Family (7 x 4) by Bettinelli
- 7) Portrait of Mussolini (4 x 3.5) by Frank Salisbury, London
- 8) Japanese Buttle [sic] scene (10 x 6) by ?
- 9) Birre ? (5 x 6) by Jean Baptiste

BOXES:

- 1) Personal photos, papers and passports
- 2) Books
- 3) Books
- 4) Marble bust of Vittorio Em.
- 5) China
- 6) Ancient pottery and statuary
- 7) Books and framed family photos
- 8) Books
- 9) Cheap? books
- 10) Books and family photo albums
- 11) Books
- 12) Books
- 13) Desk fixtures & trophies
- 14) Telescope tripod
- 15) Books
- 16) China and glassware
- 17) Books
- 18) Correspondence, stationery & sink?
- 19) Large metal statue
- 20) Books
- 21) Mirrors (large)
- 22) Chinese art paintings
- 23) Large vase
- 24) Book, photograph, Records, electrical appliances & desk fixtures
- 25) China ware
- 26) Chinese vase
- 27) China ware
- 28) Framed family portraits
- 29) Metal statue
- 30) Books
- 31) Books
- 32) Family foto portraits
- 33) China ware
- 34) China ware
- 35) Aliminium [sic] pots
- 36) Old antique pottery
- 37) Pottery
- 38) 3 large volumes of Divine Comedy
- 39) Mirrors
- 40) Blankets
- 41) Small statue & Books
- 42) China ware & Linght [sic] fixtures
- 43) Framed family Pictures
- 44) Books
- 45) Books
- 46) Books
- 47) China ware
- 48) China ware
- 49) China ware
- 50) China ware

- 51) Books
- 52) China ware & Light fixt.
- 53) China ware

2 extra Cases of Col. Dollan – SS -: SS. N1 Art Books SS. N. 2 Art Books

Appendix 2 (September 1945)

LIST OF OBJECTS, PAINTINGS AND FURNITURE

2 paintings with woodcarvings. The larger one is signed by Mario Cleverino and the other by Amato – 1934
Tunis -

- Oil landscape – Artist Renan (?)
- Industrial landscape – palette knife painting – artist Zampolini
- Family scene – unsigned oil painting
- Old woman from Abruzzo – artist Tarquini
- Church of San Casciano – artist Cannata
- Landscape – Wide Valley of Mercato Saraceno – artist P.G. Grillia
- House in Dovia – artist Vinzio
- Rocca delle Camminate [sic] – artist Cannata
- Landscape – artist Ugo Lattari
- The Duce's Oak Tree – S. Casciano – artist Vinzio
- Portrait of Vittorio Mussolini – canvas by Palmieri
- Oil portrait of Bruno Mussolini
- La Rocca delle Camminate [sic] – landscape by Vinzio
- Roman ruins – artist Renazzi
- Portrait of Gina Mussolini – artist Aprea
- Landscape – artist Cannata
- Achille Guerra's The Harvester
- Country house – artist Vailetti
- Portrait of woman – canvas by Galeazzi
- Oil portrait of Rachele Mussolini
- Portrait of man
- Portrait of woman
- Flowers – painting by Giuditta Bertolotti
- Planographic map of Vienna on parchment
- Green and black marble relic with winged lions
- RACI Tribute Cup
- Naturalistic bronze head – Gemitto
- Bronze statuette 'L'Acquaiolo' by Gemitto
- Silver casket for antique coins
- A silver filigree lighthouse
- Reproduction of the Milan Cathedral Madonnina statue
- Column-cup tribute from Casalecchio
- Silver filigree reproduction of the Genoa lighthouse
- Gilded porcelain jewellery box
- Large wrought slate plate
- White porcelain horse statuette

Appendix 3 (25 September 1947)

LIST OF FURNITURE AND VARIOUS FURNISHINGS DEPOSITED BY LAWYER LUIGI GIRARDI, SEQUESTRATOR OF THE MUSSOLINI FAMILY'S ASSETS

Sacristy

7 paintings (on papyrus) believed to be Japanese

Farm estate no. 7

Room A

1 carpet 3.50 m x 4.10 m
 1 carpet 3.10 x 5.10 m.
 1 carpet 2.40 x 1.80 m.
 1 enamelled baby bath
 1 closed crate containing a marble bust?
 3 skimmers
 1 spotlight height 1.90 m.
 1 set of scales
 1 Chinese vase ? height 1.07 m.
 1 Chinese vase 0.76 m.
 2 sky-blue kitchen chairs
 2 white kitchen chairs
 2 yellow satin living room chairs
 1 green satin armchair
 1 bronze trophy dedicated to Vittorio Mussolini
 1 red upholstered armchair
 1 leather armchair
 1 chair with leather
 1 billiard table with green cloth
 1 wooden cabinet with white enamelled stool
 9 upholstered armchairs
 2 leather armchairs
 1 wooden base with four drawers
 1 barber's chair
 1 kitchen sideboard with two drawers and three doors
 1 sky-blue lacquered cabinet with three drawers
 1 sky-blue sofa
 2 paintings depicting a man and a woman 0.80 x 0.70 m.
 12 cushions
 1 sky-blue frame
 1 white lacquered drawer
 1 white lacquered lid
 1 yellow satin sofa
 6 large photographs
 2 enamelled bowls
 1 frame 0.60 x 0.55 m.
 1 iron frame with cabinet

Room B

1 walnut bed carved in 21 pieces
 1 dressing table
 1 walnut commode with four drawers
 1 12-piece wardrobe
 2 satin armchairs
 1 desk
 1 22-piece wardrobe
 1 carved wooden armchair
 3 furniture bases
 1 cabinet with 7 drawers
 1 Japanese cabinet ?
 1 long and low table

Room C

1 frame with moulding (without picture) 2.20 m. x 1.70 m.
 1 bas-relief painting 1.30 x 1.05 m.
 1 painting with perforated canvas 1.70 x 1.60 m.
 1 frame 0.85 x 0.95 m.
 1 wall mirror with velvet edge 1.40 x 1.60 m.
 1 painting depicting a woman 1.25 x 1.50 m.

- 1 painting depicting a man 1 x 1.25 m.
- 1 painting depicting Benito Mussolini 1.75 x 1.10 m.
- 1 painting depicting Bruno Mussolini 1.30 x 1.70 m.
- 1 frame with moulding 1.70 x 1.15 m.
- 7 frames
- 1 writing desk
- 2 wardrobes with 4 doors
- 1 cabinet with 16 drawers

Room D

- 1 dresser [and] bed with metal mesh
- 1 wardrobe with 4 doors
- 1 wardrobe with 4 sliding doors and one shelf
- 1 sideboard with 4 doors and 3 shelves (wardrobe)
- 1 sideboard with 4 doors and 1 shelf
- 1 12-piece wardrobe (side and headboard missing)
- 1 dressing table with 2 shelves, a drawer and a mirror
- 1 iron piece with base

Room E

- 1 17-piece wardrobe
- 1 wardrobe without bottom and with 2 doors
- 1 cupboard with 4 drawers and 2 doors
- 19 pieces for furniture
- 10 pieces for furniture
- 1 bedside table
- 1 bookcase
- 4 bedrails
- 1 wooden base
- 1 headboard
- 2 speaker accessories

Room F

- 9 crates containing books
- 1 crate with a harmonium?
- approximately 1,400 books, magazines
- 2 bookshelves
- 3 leather-bound volumes of *Divina Commedia*

Room G

- 25 empty crates
- various broken plates and crockery

Room H

Green-rimmed ceramic tableware set, comprising:

- 182 plates
- 91 soup plates
- 55 small plates
- 82 sauce plates
- 9 serving plates (round)
- 18 soup plates (round)
- 27 serving plates (oval)
- 15 serving soup plates (oval, including 3 small ones)
- 7 soup tureens with lids (with 1 extra lid)
- 7 soup tureens without lids
- 11 small soup tureens with lids (1 without lid)
- 1 sugar bowl, 1 coffee maker, 1 milk jug, 3 saucers and 4 cups (brown-rimmed yellow set)
- 6 saucers with cup from blue floral tea set
- 11 green glass saucers
- 1 Japanese set of 36 pieces (1 broken plate and 1 chipped) with 17 ivory straws and 2 glass straws
- 5 wooden bowls
- 4 saucers with 4 different cups
- 7 vases of various sizes, 3 of which made of earthenware

1 ashtray with jar
 2 table centre plates
 1 sauce boat
 1 large plate, 1 soup tureen and 1 'Pesaro' saucer
 31 gold-rimmed plates marked 'M' by Richard-Ginori
 21 gold-rimmed saucers marked 'M' by Richard-Ginori
 1 gold-rimmed soup tureen marked 'M' by Richard-Ginori
 2 oval gold-rimmed serving plates marked 'M' by Richard-Ginori
 1 round gold-rimmed marked 'M' by Richard-Ginori
 2 oval gold-rimmed saucers marked 'M' by Richard-Ginori
 6 gold-rimmed sauce dishes marked 'M' by Richard-Ginori
 6 gold-rimmed saucers and 4 cups marked 'M' by Richard-Ginori
 11 glass jars of various sizes
 3 flasks
 6 carafes
 9 bottles (5 without caps)
 23 champagne glasses
 21 large glasses
 17 medium water glasses
 17 medium wine glasses
 26 small vermouth glasses
 13 mismatched glasses
 5 metal glasses
 3 vases presumed to be antique
 2 terracotta vases
 2 urns presumed to be antique
 1 wooden statuette depicting the Madonna
 2 wooden Buddhas (1 broken)
 1 statuette of St Justus
 1 metal bell
 1 statuette depicting 2 seals (or bears)
 1 incomplete inkwell
 1 copper vase
 1 incomplete food warmer
 4 cups and other pieces of broken cups
 3 'Sandro Baglioni' trophies
 1 broken tripod
 11 children's toys
 1 silver-coated helmet
 2 conventional pith helmets
 various photographs and paintings

Room I

1 crate containing:
 2 tennis rackets
 1 small 2-string guitar
 1 small sleigh
 1 case containing an electric shaver, a sponge, a notebook and playing cards
 1 paper bag
 1 case containing a decoration with white and sky-blue ribbon
 1 case containing a decoration without ribbon
 1 case containing a decoration with St Maurice and Lazarus
 1 case containing a decoration
 1 case containing 22 medals and plaques
 2 cases containing 2 medals
 1 ashtray
 2 wooden and metal candlesticks (one broken)
 1 hammock with mattress
 1 empty case

- 1 empty picture frame
- 1 pencil case containing 2 rubber items
- 1 oil painting by Arnaldo Mussolini
- 1 case containing decoration for valour from the Republic of San Marino
- 12 military caps
- 4 black ties
- 2 blue scarves
- 1 blue canvas jacket
- 1 canvas belt
- 1 black strip

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Italian summary

Il saggio ricostruisce la vicenda di un'ampia raccolta di oggetti personali, arredi, libri, fotografie e documenti appartenuti a Benito Mussolini e al suo entourage, interrogandosi sul destino materiale e simbolico di tali beni nel secondo dopoguerra. Dopo il crollo della Repubblica Sociale Italiana, questi materiali furono trasferiti dal lago di Garda ai Monti Riuniti di Credito su Pegno di Brescia, entrando in una zona grigia tra custodia amministrativa, rimozione e possibile riuso. Ritenuti privi di particolare valore storico-artistico ma potenzialmente pericolosi come oggetti suscettibili di alimentare forme di culto o nostalgia, essi furono in larga parte eliminati all'inizio degli anni Cinquanta, in un contesto in cui l'opinione pubblica oscillava tra rimozione del passato, indulgenza verso il regime e tentativi di ridefinizione della memoria collettiva. L'analisi di questi oggetti consente di aprire una prospettiva diversa sulla cultura materiale del fascismo, mettendo in luce gusti estetici, pratiche quotidiane e modalità di autorappresentazione del potere. Attraverso lo studio della dimensione domestica e privata del regime, l'articolo contribuisce a comprendere più a fondo le dinamiche interne di gestione del potere e i processi di costruzione simbolica che ne hanno sostenuto la legittimazione.

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