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Author

Aguirre, Mariana

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Concealing African Art: Ardengo Soffici and Carlo Carrà's Ambivalent Primitivism

Mariana Aguirre

Since the early 2000s, postcolonial approaches to Italian history have rendered a nuanced picture of this nation's visual culture. These studies have analyzed Fascist colonialism and its impact on visual culture, film, architecture, and urbanism, complementing art historical scholarship on primitivism.¹ They have shed light on the fact that despite not having access to important collections of African art, Italian artists often incorporated its plasticity, "savagery," sincerity, and deformation. Although these experiments were discouraged, overlooked, and concealed, primitivism developed during Fascism, mostly within contexts related to jazz or colonialism.² During the late 1930s, the *Leggi razziali* (Italian racial laws) gave rise to persistent claims that looking at non-Western sources would weaken Italian art and society.³ In addition to post-war historians' reluctance to study Fascist modernism, statements such as these have led to a relative disinterest in primitivism. In many ways, this process was prefigured by its earliest adopters, who engaged with African art before and during World War I only to dismiss it as part of their return to order.

Ardengo Soffici's and Carlo Carrà's adoption and rejection of primitivism inaugurated its fraught reception during the Fascist regime. Before the war, both artists developed a Cubo-futurist aesthetic and incorporated primitivism into a number of their works. Although they gradually distanced themselves from it, other artists and critics relied on both overt and subtle references to African art. Thus, Soffici and Carrà initiated an important cycle of dependence and concealment of the "primitive."

Although Futurism relied on primitivism from its founding manifesto in 1909 until the movement ran its course, Soffici's and Carrà's careers shed a particular light on this appropriation's unstable nature. Their engagement with African art, Fauvism, Cubism, Futurism, and *pittura metafisica* developed more or less between 1910 and 1922, and both artists sought to renew Italian art by combining tradition and modernity. Moreover, Soffici's and Carrà's primitivism was part of a complex cultural exchange between Italy, France, Germany, the United States, and Western Africa.⁴ Although studies have privileged French and German primitivism,

¹ For the recent anthologies on Fascist colonialism and culture, see Ruth Ben-Ghiat and Mia Fuller, eds., *Italian Colonialism* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016); Valeria de Plano and Alessandro Pes, eds., *Quel che resta dell'impero. La cultura coloniale degli italiani* (Milan: Mimesis, 2014); Cristina Lombardi-Diop, ed., *Postcolonial Italy: The Colonial Past in Contemporary Culture* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013); and Patrizia Palumbo, ed., *A Place in the Sun: Africa in Italian Colonial Culture from Post-Unification to the Present* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2003). This is but a sampling of recent approaches to this topic.

² See for instance, Mariana Aguirre, "The Jazz Age, Neapolitans, and Primitivism: Futurist Cuisine at the Exposition Coloniale Internationale (1931)," in *Transatlantic Trade and Global Cultural Transfers Since 1492. More than Commodities*, ed. Martina Kaller and Frank Jacob (New York: Routledge, 2019). See also Luca Cerchiari, "How to Make a Career by Writing against Jazz: Anton Giulio Bragaglia's *Jazz Band* (1929)," *Forum Italicum* 49 (2015): 462-73.

³ Although the Fascist regime did not repudiate modernism, efforts such as the official magazine *La Difesa della razza* (1938-43) attacked the avant-gardes and their primitivism.

⁴ See Jean-Louis Paudrat, "From Africa," in "*Primitivism*" in *Twentieth-Century Art: Affinity of the Tribal and Modern*, ed. William Rubin, vol. 1 (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 1984), 125-75.

Italian artists and intellectuals participated in this global conversation, which was also shaped by Italian nationalism, colonialism, and the taste for “naïve” or folk sources.

This paper discusses how Soffici and Carrà abandoned or concealed their exotic sources. Although Soffici reconfigured Pablo Picasso’s *Les Femmes d’Alger (O. J. R. M.)* (1907), he stopped praising African sculpture in 1913. Instead, he proposed a return to the Italian primitive painters and to folk Tuscan art.⁵ This allowed him to retain African art’s plasticity and sincerity while relying on folk/native sources that could form the basis of a national aesthetic. In spite of this shift, he returned to primitivism in a series of murals that depicted the Parisian avant-garde scene.

Carrà did not write positively about primitivism, but it was nevertheless present in his futurist, naïve, metaphysical, and archaic periods. Additionally, during his metaphysical phase, the artist evoked Cubism and its volumes, indirectly recalling African art. In general, these artists’ primitivism was often contradictory, since they returned to African sources or their effects on modern painting even after having dismissed them; more importantly, they retained some qualities attributed to them while moving towards the Italian primitives, folk art, and other native sources.

Dependency, Disavowal, Nationalism, and Modernity

French, German, and Italian imperialism allowed artists to come into contact with African sources, and Soffici and Carrà, adapted French primitivism in order to restore Italy’s artistic hegemony. Despite their increasing nationalism their works did not articulate an imperial iconography, but they eventually shifted towards folk art and the Italian primitive painters. With time, they began to express a disdain for French modernism and its non-Western sources. Although they and many other critics recommended that artists overlook African art, a not unimportant number of their peers continued to rely on it, prolonging this contradictory appropriation.

The impression that Fascism did not support modernism and that its colonialism, and by extension its primitivism, were “weak” or inexistent has precluded a fuller understanding of Soffici and Carrà’s abandonment of primitivism.⁶ During the past decades, however, important studies on Italian art have analyzed primitivist paintings and sculptures. Moreover, scholarship on Italian primitivism, race, and colonialism has complemented these approaches, and the studies I will discuss below have noted that Italian artists’ interest and rejection of African art were part of a continental phenomenon. They were also informed by Italy’s weak national identity as well as by some intellectuals’ rejection of modernity and cosmopolitanism.

Although the fashion for Africa was not as prevalent as in France, Italy developed an interest in non-Western cultures at around the same time, which left their traces in art, architecture, film, visual culture, music, and exhibitions. For example, Karen Pinkus’s examination of liberal and Fascist advertisements found that images of black bodies shaped Italians’ colonial consciousness

⁵ Alessio Martini, “Ardengo Soffici,” in *Come un paese in una pupila: paesaggio e figura nell’arte a Firenze tra le due guerre*, ed. Marco Fagioli (San Miniato: Accademia degli Euteleti, 1992), 40.

⁶ For instance, Ezio Bassani suggests that primitivism exerted its influence in an “underground fashion” during Fascism; see Ezio Bassani, “Italian Painting,” in *“Primitivism” in Twentieth-Century Art*, 412-13.

and national identity.⁷ Additionally, jazz was popular during the regime, and informed a number of Futurist projects and works of art during the 1920s and 1930s.⁸

The academic study of non-Western art was not as developed in Italy as in France or Germany, and neither did it usually merge with modern art. Nevertheless, the modernist magazine *Valori Plastici* published translations of a series of books on non-Western art during the early 1920s.⁹ Unlike what occurred in France, Germany, and the United States, modern artists did not exhibit their works alongside “primitive” art, and there were few to none private collections of African art at the time. In spite of this, the 1922 Venice Biennale featured a small exhibition of wooden sculptures from Africa.¹⁰ The pieces on view were lent by the ethnographic museums in Florence and Rome, and although the exhibit referred to them as valuable examples of “primordial art,” it treated modernist primitivism as a thing of the past with little influence in Italy.¹¹

Despite Soffici’s and Carrà’s shift towards Italian sources and the lack of critical interest on modernist primitivism after the 1922 Biennale, primitivism and African art continued to reappear during Fascism. This occurred in Futurist projects tied to jazz or colonialism by Fortunato Depero and Enrico Prampolini, for instance.¹² Moreover, exhibits of colonial art were held in 1931, 1934, and 1936, and some of the African sculptures exhibited in Venice were also included in the *Mostra Triennale delle Terre d’Oltremare*, held in 1940.¹³ Additionally, Thayat, Massimo Campigli, Mario Sironi, Regina Bracchi, and many others, incorporated primitivism into their works even outside of colonial contexts. This demonstrates that Italy’s artists never lost sight of primitivism, and more importantly, that their engagement with it was coopted by the regime. In fact, despite the regime’s preference for an art based on Italy’s tradition, there were no important official initiatives against primitivism until the late 1930s.¹⁴ Thus, Carrà’s and Soffici’s primitivism is important for our understanding of Fascism’s art and visual culture, since it prefigured the regime’s reliance on it *as well as* its subsequent disposal.¹⁵

Over the past thirty years or so, several studies have focused on the development of primitivism with respect to Futurism, the Metaphysical School, architecture, and visual culture. For example, Ezio Bassani traced Carrà’s, Soffici’s, and Umberto Boccioni’s study of French primitivism and discussed specific masks or sculptures they might have adapted.¹⁶ He describes the pre-history of Fascist primitivism, but does not consider what occurred after African sculpture

⁷ Karen Pinkus, *Bodily Regimes: Italian Advertising under Fascism* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1995), 24.

⁸ For an account of jazz and its influence in Italian culture, see Anna Harwell Celenza, *Jazz Italian Style: From Its Origins in New Orleans to Fascist Italy and Sinatra* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007).

⁹ This series had originally been edited in Germany by Carl Einstein’s friend and collaborator Paul Westheim and included the former’s second book, *Afrikanische Plastik*. See Carl Einstein, *Scultura Africana*, trans. Italo Tivolato (Rome: Edizioni di Valori Plastici, 1922).

¹⁰ Bassani, “Italian Painting,” 412.

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² See Aguirre, “The Jazz Age, Neapolitans, and Primitivism.”

¹³ For an account of colonial exhibitions in Italy, see Giuliana Tomasella, *Esporre l’Italia coloniale: interpretazioni dell’alterità* (Padua: Il Poligrafo, 2017).

¹⁴ Primitivism had been criticized in official magazines, but it was not formally opposed until the creation of institutions such as the Premio Cremona and the racist magazine *La Difesa della razza* (1938-43).

¹⁵ Whereas Futurism relied on references to Africa throughout the regime, these artists’ shift to folk sources demonstrates that they adapted primitivism to suit their needs. Specifically, they kept African art’s sincerity and plasticity in order to ground a ruralist aesthetic tied to folk art and the Italian primitive painters, a reaction against foreign avant-gardism, Futurism, and the regime’s emphasis on classicism.

¹⁶ Bassani, “Italian Painting,” 405-14.

was on view in Venice in 1922. In particular, my analysis builds upon this discussion of sources, since primitivism often went beyond straightforward, formal borrowings.

In many ways, the existence of a broader interest in folk and archaic European sources complemented “exotic” primitivism and explains why Soffici, Carrà, and others were able to move from African art to folk art with such ease. Ara Merjian’s analysis of Giorgio de Chirico’s metaphysical paintings considers them in light of this expanded primitivism, which was indebted to Friedrich Nietzsche’s interest in pre-Socratic Greece.¹⁷ He also notes that de Chirico and Alberto Savinio minimized their involvement with African art, and that de Chirico’s works tended towards archaism, ritual, and atavism, elements that were also present in “exotic” primitivism.¹⁸ This suggests that de Chirico’s metaphysical works as well as Soffici’s and Carrà’s interest “sincerity” and the “naïve” must be understood within a broader phenomenon that questioned modernity and novelty.

Lucia Re has described Futurism’s primitivism, noting its seemingly paradoxical reliance on modernity and atavism.¹⁹ Re argued that Filippo Tommaso Marinetti supported Italian colonialism but did not rely on racist tropes and that he had a more complex relationship to Africa than other Italian intellectuals.²⁰ In spite of his nationalism, he was not as anxious about the use of foreign sources, which distanced him from Soffici and Carrà. Additionally, he considered that barbarism and primitivism could be modern, hence Futurism’s closeness to jazz and ability to create works of art to celebrate Fascist colonialism.²¹ More importantly, Re observes that the Libyan war lasted from 1911 to 1932, but that its significance was repressed during the post-war era, much like the historical memory of artistic primitivism.²²

Other studies have centered on primitivism beyond the fine arts, noting how this manifested itself in colonial architecture as well as in approaches characterized by ruralism or regionalism. Specifically, Mia Fuller has analyzed how Italian architects looked to examples of French and British colonial architecture in order to build the Italian empire.²³ Like Soffici and Carrà, architects such as Florestano di Fausto incorporated local or “exotic” solutions from Libya; several architects justified this hybridity by claiming that these solutions were actually Roman, that is, always already Italian.²⁴ Additionally, other architects sought to reinforce a weak national identity by incorporating rustic sources, and scholars such as Michelangelo Sabatino have discussed the rise of a vernacular modernism during the ’1920s, which emerged as an alternative to Rationalism and classicism.²⁵ This preoccupation was linked to Soffici’s and Carrà’s taste for

¹⁷ Ara Merjian, “Untimely Objects: Giorgio de Chirico’s *The Evil Genius of a King* (1914) between the Antediluvian and the Posthuman,” *RES: Anthropology and Aesthetics*, no. 57-58 (2010): 186-208.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 190.

¹⁹ Lucia Re, “Italians and the Invention of Race: The Poetics and Politics of Difference in the Struggle over Libya, 1890-1913,” *California Italian Studies* 1, no. 1 (2010): 1-58.

²⁰ I would argue that Filippo Tommaso Marinetti’s characterization of Africans is racist, but Re is correct in stating that he had a more complex view of Africa than his peers.

²¹ The Futurists participated in the Paris 1931 Exposition coloniale internationale, and the inauguration of their pavilion featured jazz music, the participation of Josephine Baker, and murals by Prampolini with references to jazz.

²² Re, “Italians and the Invention of Race,” 6.

²³ Mia Fuller, *Moderns Abroad: Architecture, Cities, and Italian Imperialism in the Mediterranean and East Africa* (London: Taylor & Francis, 2007).

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 17. See also Stephanie Malia Hom, “Empires of Tourism: Travel and Rhetoric in Italian Colonial Libya and Albania, 1911-1943,” *Journal of Tourism History* 4, no. 3 (2012): 288.

²⁵ Michelangelo Sabatino, *Pride in Modesty: Modernist Architecture and the Vernacular Tradition in Italy* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2010).

folk or “naïve” art, eventually converging in *Strapaese* and its interest in *case coloniche*.²⁶ Thus, while these painters created works of art that actively looked at African sculptures and Italian folk art, architects sought spontaneous and “naïve” solutions in common rural buildings. In any case, it is clear that primitivism, whether folk or “exotic,” was part of the Italian response to modernity.

Scholars have also analyzed the context that informed the development of modernist primitivism in Italy by looking at an expanded primitivism and its intersection with race. In doing so, they have discussed the notion of Italy as an internal Other within Europe as well as characterizations of Southern Italians as “primitives.” For instance, Emily Braun has found that primitivism manifested itself in many ways, since it could be “primordial, archaic, vernacular, barbaric, naïve, rural, artisanal and *popolaresco*.”²⁷ Moreover, she notes that despite its nationalism, it could be anti-conformist, as in the case of Soffici’s turn towards African art in 1911, which initially sought to destabilize Italy’s traditionalist art establishment. Eventually, this interest in folk art and ruralism sought to undermine Fascism’s interest in classicism and Rationalist architecture.²⁸ Since Italy emerged as a subaltern nation within Europe during the nineteenth century, “exotic” primitive sources were incorporated as a way to define a stronger national identity tied to imperialism.²⁹ Italians thus created an external, inferior Other, which justified their invasion of Libya and other territories.

Rhiannon Noel Welch’s analysis of Italian racism presents a different perspective that also contextualizes the shift from “exotic” to a native primitivism in Soffici’s and Carrà’s works.³⁰ She notes that Fascist colonialism was a prolongation of liberal nationalism and imperialism, and that it built upon the notion of a vital Italian subject symbolized by the *bracciante* (rural worker).³¹ According to this approach, the *braccianti* were genuine Italians who would contribute to national health and progress; these individuals were authentic, naïve, and tied to the land, thus recalling some of the attributes of African and folk art. Moreover, a portion of this population was supposed to move to Italy’s African colonies. In many ways, this focus on agricultural workers and their ties to the land and tradition also opposed the emergence of urban proletarians as a revolutionary class on the left.

The tensions created by modernity and a weak national identity led artists and intellectuals to engage with a broad formulation of the primitive, whether folk or “exotic.” Thus, both Soffici and Carrà wrote about African and folk art in order to create an alternative to academicism, post-Impressionism, Cubism, and Futurism. Their primitivism proposed a naïve, sincere approach in the wake of avant-gardism and rapid urbanization.

My analysis of primitivism isolates what occurred in the years leading up to the war and during the rise of Fascism. By looking at Carrà and Soffici, I suggest that their primitivism oscillated between dependency and disavowal. This primitivism, whether “exotic” or tied to folk art, was rooted in tradition and mostly revolved around the restoration of painting’s plasticity. This emphasis on plasticity is important, since Maria Grazia Messina has linked European

²⁶ Ottone Rosai, who joined Ardengo Soffici in *Strapaese* illustrated a book on *case coloniche*; see Mario Tinti, *L’architettura delle case coloniche in Toscana* (Florence: Rinascimento del libro, 1934).

²⁷ Emily Braun, “*Italia barbara*: Italian Primitives from Piero to Pasolini,” *Journal of Modern Italian Studies* 17, no. 3 (2012): 261.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 264.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 259.

³⁰ Rhiannon Noel Welch, *Vital Subjects: Race and Biopolitics in Italy (1860-1920)* (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2016).

³¹ *Ibid.*, 5.

primitivism to sculpture and to its alleged status as the oldest art; this implies that whether they were looking at African or folk art, these artists sought a stable, solid art that could be part of an aesthetic and political renaissance.³² Thus, their relationship to African art and modernist primitivism was part of a broader renegotiation of Italian identity in light of colonialism, modernization, and the loss of tradition.

Ardengo Soffici: From African Sculpture to the Art of Tuscan Peasants

Although he is virtually unknown outside of Italy, Ardengo Soffici was a key figure before and during Fascism.³³ He spent seven years in Paris, during which he was part of symbolist circles, was close to Guillaume Apollinaire and Picasso, and was among the first Italian artists to engage with African art. After his return from Paris in 1907, he embarked upon a didactic mission to educate Italians regarding the latest modernist developments in order to create a national aesthetic. He did so by writing for influential avant-garde magazines, such as Giuseppe Prezzolini's *La Voce*, eventually launching *Lacerba* with Giovanni Papini. Between 1907 and 1915, Soffici wrote a series of seminal articles discussing Gustave Courbet, Paul Cézanne, Impressionism, Arthur Rimbaud, Henri Rousseau, Cubism, and Futurism. The artist also organized an important exhibition of French Impressionist and Post-Impressionist works in Florence in 1910. Although he returned from Paris more or less when Picasso began to look at African art, his art criticism and works of art demonstrate that he was aware of this exploration of the 'exotic'. Despite this early interest in African sculpture, the artist abandoned it in favor of Tuscan folk art; at the same time, he retained some qualities attributed to the wooden sculptures, such as plasticity and sincerity.

Soffici, who likely saw Picasso's *Les Femmes d'Alger (O. J. R. Version O)* in Paris, wrote about African sources between 1911 and 1915. This interest was tied to his desire to promote Cubism in Italy, but he turned against it when he joined Futurism. Like many other artists who adapted Cubism, he included local references and praised African sculpture's plasticity and solidity. For example, his large painting *I Mendicanti* (1911; Fig. 1) reconfigured the *Femmes d'Alger*, and he also executed contemporaneous studies of bathers recalling Paul Cézanne's and André Derain's works. In this painting, he retained the composition and scale of Picasso's, but tempered the latter's "savagery" by replacing the prostitutes with Tuscan peasants, all but erasing references to African masks and deformed bodies. At the same time, he included a certain awkwardness, sincerity, and plasticity. Despite its clear reliance on Picasso and his primitivism, this canvas anticipates how Soffici would eventually shift towards folk art while retaining values often attributed to African sculpture.

Soffici's article on Cubism, "Picasso and Braque," published in *La Voce* in 1911, was more or less contemporaneous with his reconfiguration of the *Femmes d'Alger*.³⁴ Although this positive appraisal of African art would be short-lived, he was among the first European critics to write about Cubism's debt to it. In many ways, Soffici's article tied Cubism's reliance on African art to plasticity, or volume, in order to promote his vision for Italian renewal, that is, as part of his

³² Maria Grazia Messina, *Le muse d'oltremare: esotismo e primitivismo dell'arte contemporanea* (Turin: Einaudi, 1994), 5-12.

³³ For an analysis of Soffici and his role within the Florentine avant-garde, see Walter Adamson, *Avant-Garde Florence: From Modernism to Fascism* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1993). See also Alessandro del Puppo, *Lacerba 1913-1915: arte e critica d'arte* (Bergamo: Lubrina, 2000), and id., *Modernità e nazione: temi di ideologia visiva nell'arte italiana del primo Novecento* (Macerata: Quodlibet, 2012), especially chapters 2 and 5.

³⁴ Ardengo Soffici, "Picasso e Braque," *La Voce* (August 24, 1911): 635-37.

project to develop a national style. For instance, the artist noted that African sculpture had aided Cubism to reject Impressionism's dissolution of form and that this was in fact a return to Italian art's plasticity:

Tuttavia il passo decisivo, quello che doveva condurre il nostro artista in un campo di esperienze molto più avanzate, non fu fatto che, un paio d'anni più tardi, e cioè quando egli, dopo essersi progressivamente allontanato dal modo di vedere degli impressionisti, trovò; in un'arte opposta alla loro un fondamento più fermo alle sue ricerche ulteriori. Quest'arte fu la pittura e la scultura degli antichissimi egiziani, e quelle africani—e forse anche più nativamente sintetiche—dei popoli selvaggi dell'Africa meridionale. [...] Picasso invece [al contrario di Gauguin]—fors'anche in grazia della sua origine quasi moresca—una volta arrivato alla comprensione e all'amore di quell'arte ingenua e grande, semplice ed espressiva, grossolana e raffinata ad un tempo, subito seppe appropriarsene le virtù essenziali, e poichè queste consistono insomma nell'interpretar realisticamente la natura deformandone gli aspetti secondo un'occulta necessità lirica, affine d'intensificare la suggestività, egli s'applicò d'allora in poi a tradurre, nelle sue opere, il vero trasformandolo e deformandolo, non peraltro al modo che facevano i suoi maestri, ma—com'essi gl'insegnavano ciascuno con un particolare esempio—seguendo i propri moti della sua anima moderna.³⁵

(Moreover, the decisive step, which would lead our artist [Picasso] to more advanced experiences, was not taken until two years later, that is, when after progressively distancing himself from the Impressionists' vision, he found a more solid foundation for his later research in an art opposite to theirs. This art was the painting and sculpture of the ancient Egyptians and of the Africans—and perhaps the more innately synthetic—that of the savage peoples of southern Africa. [...] Once Picasso [...] [unlike Gauguin]—even perhaps due to his somewhat Moorish origin—understood and loved that naïve and great art, simple and expressive, coarse and refined at once, he was immediately able to appropriate its essential virtues, and since they consisted in realistically interpreting nature by deforming its aspects according to a hidden lyrical need to intensify its suggestive qualities, applied himself from then on to translate the real in his works by transforming and deforming it, not as his masters had done, but—as each showed him by example—by following his modern soul's own ways.)

Although he referred to Africans as “popoli selvaggi,” Soffici valued their sculptures' plasticity, which he linked to Italian art.³⁶ Moreover, he referred to them as naïve and simple, which rendered them close to other figures he valued: the Italian primitives, Cézanne, and Rousseau. As such, African sculpture tied Italian modernism to the Italian primitives *and* French modernism. In a sense, it functioned as the primordial glue that united Soffici's blend of French and Italian sources.

Unlike Wassily Kandinsky, who looked at African sculpture and other “primitive” sources in order to create a universal approach to art, Soffici developed a regional/national response to

³⁵ Ibid., 636.

³⁶ Ibid.

French modernism.³⁷ This nationalist tone was not shared by others figures who wrote about the same phenomenon before 1920, such as Apollinaire and Carl Einstein.³⁸ Although Soffici recognized that African sculpture led Cubism to return to the solidity and volumes abandoned by Impressionism, he suggested that this was better understood as a return to Giotto's plasticity. In other words, he did not interpret primitivism as a break with the Renaissance.



Fig. 1. Ardengo Soffici, *I Mendicanti*, 1911. Tempera, 120 x 146 cm.
Photo: Age Fotostock Spain. Heirs of Ardengo Soffici.

For the most part, Soffici left his formal references to African art behind around 1914, but he continued to value its sincerity and roughness, which he mapped onto Tuscan folk art. However, the implications of this shift with respect to other Italian artists' primitivism have not been fully

³⁷ This is evident in Wassily Kandinsky's publication *Der Blaue Reiter Almanach* (1912), whose quest to create a universal art was illustrated by numerous folk and non-Western objects and works of art.

³⁸ Carl Einstein was the only one of these critics to go beyond a formal analysis of African sculpture, seeking instead a complex historical and anthropological reading. See Carl Einstein, *Negerplastik* (Munich: K. Wolff, 1915), and id., *Afrikanische Plastik* (Berlin: Ernst Wasmuth, 1922).

discussed.³⁹ In 1913, he began to minimize African art's contribution to Cubism; for instance, he suggested in *Lacerba* that several Italian Old Masters had been more influential:⁴⁰

Chi desiderasse nomi celebri di precursori del cubismo, anche senza risalire ai nostri primitivi, ai bizantini, agli egiziani, agli africani, si potrebbero citare quelli di Masaccio, del Greco, di Rembrandt, di Tintoretto. Di tutti quei pittori che nelle loro opere hanno cercato di esprimere [...] la sobria sodezza dei corpi e degli oggetti, il peso, la gravitazione delle masse, l'equilibrio dei piani e dei volumi.— La forza del chiaroscuro.

(Noterò anzi, per incidente, che sotto questo aspetto la migliore arte italiana, il cui merito precipuo consiste appunto in questa sobrietà, sodezza, pesantezza, equilibrio, è d'essenza precisamente cubista—e il cubismo, perciò, specialmente consono alla nostra tradizione.)⁴¹

(To those seeking the names of famous cubist predecessors, beyond considering our primitives, the Byzantines, the Egyptians, and the Africans, one could list Masaccio, el Greco, Rembrandt, Tintoretto. All these painters that sought to express [...] the sober solidity of bodies and objects, their weight, the masses' gravitation, balance in drapery and volumes. —The force of chiaroscuro.

[I shall instead note, incidentally, that according to this point of view, the best Italian art, whose primary merit consists of this precise sobriety, solidity, heaviness, equilibrium, is essentially cubist—and because of this, Cubism is especially close to our tradition].)

In this same article, Soffici praised Futurism over Cubism, using his magazine to promote the Italian movement during his and Papini's short-lived collaboration with Marinetti. Although Soffici's association with Futurism did not lead him to focus on the depiction of technological or urban concerns, the movement's desire to be ultra-modern informed his views on African art.

A year later, in 1914, Soffici denounced primitivism altogether, stating that African and Egyptian art were archaic and could offer nothing to Italian art.⁴² These ideas appeared in "L'antiarcaismo futurista," which was included in an anthology of his writings published in light of *Lacerba's* collaboration with Futurism, *Cubismo e futurismo*.⁴³ Despite having praised Cézanne since 1907 or so, Soffici explained that Cézanne's works' "forza espressiva e la loro grandosità non sian tanto dovute a uno studio penetrante della natura quanto a un'applicazione di antichissimi modi" ("expressive force and greatness were not so much due to a penetrating study of nature, but rather, to the application of the most ancient means").⁴⁴ Since Cubism descended

³⁹ On Soffici's *trofeini* (or works after folk paintings) allowing him to leave Cubism's African roots behind, see Martini, "Ardeno Soffici," 40. However, Martini does not explore how this is connected to Soffici's career as a whole, and in fact considers it as the first example of Soffici's research into grafting the modern onto traditional art. It is my contention that this is not the first time Soffici blended modernism and tradition. This shift is also discussed in del Puppo, "*Lacerba*," 211-19.

⁴⁰ See Soffici, "Cubismo e oltre (abecedario)," *Lacerba* 1, no. 3 (1913): 10-11; and "Cubismo e oltre (abecedario)," *Lacerba* 1, no. 4 (1913): 18-19.

⁴¹ Soffici, "Cubismo e oltre (abecedario)," *Lacerba* 1, no. 3: 10.

⁴² See Soffici, "L'antiarcaismo futurista," in *Cubismo e futurismo* (Florence: Vallecchi, 1914).

⁴³ It appears that he wrote this essay upon the request of Carlo Carrà. Del Puppo, "*Lacerba*," 214.

⁴⁴ Soffici, "L'antiarcaismo futurista," 76.

from him, it too relied on archaism and was prone to excessive repetition and intellectualism.⁴⁵ Moreover, Soffici lumped art from the Congo with Egyptian art, assuming that the former was archaic.⁴⁶ This dismissal of Cézanne, Cubism, and its African sources allowed him to claim that Futurism was the only truly modern style.⁴⁷ This approach went further than Soffici's earlier characterization of primitivism in *Lacerba*, since Futurism and its *antiarcaismo* temporarily displaced Cubism and Cézanne as his models. More importantly, this characterization of African art as archaic or anachronistic corresponded to a shift towards praising the sign paintings he found in rural Tuscany.

As in the case of Apollinaire and Picasso, Soffici's interest in African art developed more or less contemporaneously with his study of Henri Rousseau. In Italy, Rousseau's works greatly influenced Giorgio de Chirico, Carrà, and the Novecento.⁴⁸ Rousseau's naïve aesthetic was adapted by Soffici in works such as *Cacio e pere* (1914; Fig. 2), which displayed a rustic awkwardness located in Tuscany and its peasants. Whereas abandoning African sculptures aided Soffici to relativize Cubism's importance in favor of Futurism, turning towards Rousseau and the paintings of peasants allowed Soffici to retain "primitive" sources' alleged roughness and sincerity. Thus, between 1911 and 1914, Soffici shifted from an "exotic" primitivism to a sincere awkwardness. While Rousseau's works informed the dream-like representations of *pittura metafisica* and the Novecento, this artist's aesthetic also sustained the ruralism sought by Soffici before the war, which informed the rise and development of *Strapaese*.⁴⁹



Fig. 2. Ardengo Soffici, *Cacio e pere*, 1914. Tempera on cardboard, 70 x 45 cm.
Photo courtesy of Farsettiarte. Heirs of Ardengo Soffici.

⁴⁵ Ibid., 77.

⁴⁶ Ibid. Most of the sculptures that arrived from the Congo dated from the nineteenth century.

⁴⁷ Ibid., 78.

⁴⁸ See Gabriella Belli and Guy Cogeval, *Henri Rousseau—Archaic Naivety* (Milan: 24 ORE Cultura, 2015); see also Elena Pontiggia, *Lo stupore nello sguardo: la fortuna di Rousseau in Italia: da Soffici e Carrà a Breveglieri* (Cinisello Balsamo, Milan: Silvana, 2011).

⁴⁹ The movement was led by Mino Maccari and Leo Longanesi, but Soffici was seen as an important precursor and contributed articles to their magazines, *Il Selvaggio* and *L'Italiano*, during the 1920s and 1930s.

Although Soffici began to relativize the importance of African art in 1913, a later work returned to Picasso's *Demoiselles*, suggesting that his formal rejection of African art was not linear. The *Sala dei manichini* (1914; Figs. 3 and 4), a series of frescoes he created for Papini's villa in Bulciano, relied on African art and proposed a positive evaluation of the Parisian scene. For the second time in less than five years, Soffici incorporated elements from the *Demoiselles* into a large-scale work; he also added references to collage and to the works of Robert Delaunay, Marc Chagall, and André Derain.⁵⁰ This particular series is also important because several of its figures represent non-European individuals, and the frescos' awkward style simultaneously recalls Rousseau and the aforementioned Tuscan painters. However, unlike Picasso's women, the "African" figures depicted by Soffici are not menacing "savages," since they were part of an idealized representation of the Parisian scene.



Fig. 3. Detail, Ardengo Soffici, *La Sala dei manichini*, 1914. Tempera fresco.
Photo: Age Fotostock Spain. Heirs of Ardengo Soffici.

⁵⁰ See Franco Russoli, ed., *Ardengo Soffici. L'artista e lo scrittore nella cultura del '900* (Florence: CentroDi Edizioni, 1975), cited in Luigi Cavallo, ed., *Soffici. Immagini e documenti (1879-1964)* (Florence: Vallecchi, 1986), 234. Russoli identifies the influence of Picasso, Delaunay, Chagall, Derain, and Van Dongen. He sees this combination of Cubism and Expressionism as similar to that of Ernst Ludwig Kirchner, Karl Schmidt-Rotluff, and even Mikhail Larionov.



Fig. 4. Detail, Ardengo Soffici, *La Sala dei manichini*, 1914. Tempera fresco.
Photo: Age Fotostock Spain. Heirs of Ardengo Soffici.

In many ways, Soffici's murals belong to the tradition of pastoral landscape which had been recently updated by Henri Matisse. For instance, the largest portion of the *Sala* resembles one of Matisse's most important pastorals, *Joy of Life* (1905-06). While pastoral landscapes illustrate peaceful scenes, such representations often surfaced at times of chaos and strife.⁵¹ Since Soffici had hoped to collaborate with Apollinaire, Carrà, de Chirico, and Savinio in the future, these works revisit the primitivism Soffici had rejected in 1913 and 1914 in order to negate the effects of war, since he included African women within a Mediterranean Arcadia. In other words, the war led to Soffici's temporary return to African references in order to evoke a harmonious, Franco-Italian atmosphere. It is important to note, however, that these murals looked towards French modernism during a moment of crisis; after the war, Soffici declared a radical return to tradition in magazines such as *La Vraie Italie* and *Rete Mediterranea* and harshly attacked "exotic" primitivism.⁵²

During the 1920s, the rise of Fascism and *Strapaese* provided Soffici with the impetus to continue to attack primitivism. In many ways, this was merely part of his broader rejection of foreign sources. In 1928, for instance, he denounced "[L]a bassa volgarità accademica, il diletantismo primitivistico o arcaiceggiante, [e] l'avvenirismo romantico, anarchico, tedeschizzante o americanizzante" ("academic base vulgarity, primitivist or archaizing diletantism, [and] utopianism, whether romantic, anarchic, Germanicizing, or Americanizing").⁵³ While his murals had momentarily returned to artists active in Paris, during the 1920s and 1930s, Soffici supported younger artists such as Achille Lega, Giorgio Morandi, and Ottone Rosai, whose landscapes, interiors, and still lives were close to *Strapaese*'s interest in rural life.

⁵¹ John Dixon Hunt, "Introduction: Pastorals and Pastoralism," in *The Pastoral Landscape, Conference Proceedings* (Hannover: University Press of New England, 1992), 15.

⁵² Soffici returned to Cubism after World War II.

⁵³ See Soffici, "Arte fascista," in *Periplo dell'arte* (Florence: Vallecchi, 1928), later republished in *Opere V* (Florence: Vallecchi, 1963), 137-41. Cited in del Puppo, *Modernità e nazione*, 152n29. It is likely that the original article appeared in Giuseppe Bottai's magazine *Critica fascista*; see Soffici, "Arte fascista," *Critica fascista* 4 (1926), 383-85.

Carlo Carrà's Unacknowledged Primitivism

Carlo Carrà's primitivism relied on African art during a longer period, despite not acknowledging his debt to it. Initially, his works responded to Cubism and Futurism as well as to his growing interest in children's art. Moreover, works such as *Portrait of Russolo* (1913) and *Composition with the Head of a Woman* (1915; Fig. 5) suggest that he was looking at African masks and sculptures directly.⁵⁴ This dialogue continued until about 1922 or so and included an archaizing phase that followed his collaboration with de Chirico and Savinio. Carrà's refusal to admit the importance of African sculptures was part of the "return to order;" however, he was unable to convince his peers that his art was unrelated fully devoid of exoticism and was blamed for denigrating the Italian race during the late 1930s.

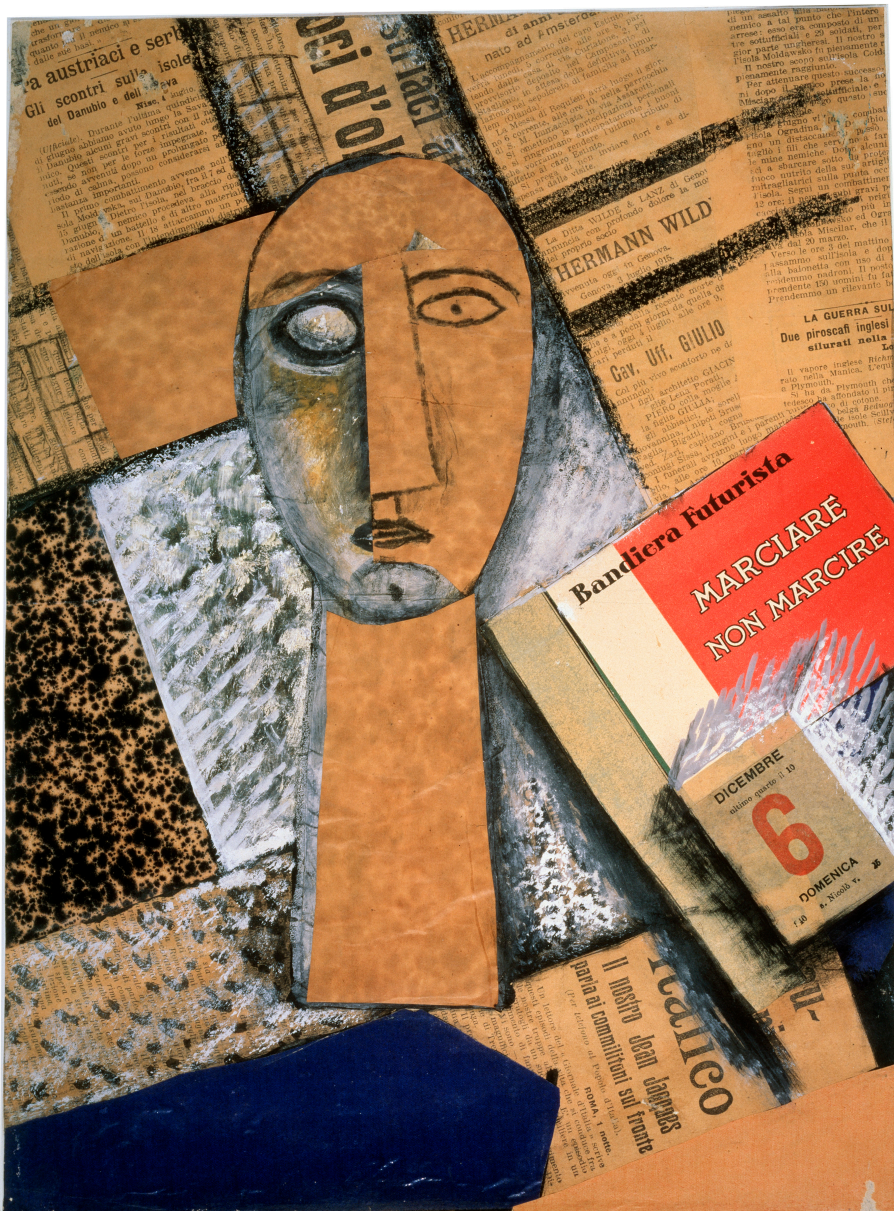


Fig 5. Carlo Carrà, *Composition with Head of a Woman*, 1915. Photo: Art Resource, New York.

⁵⁴ Bassani, "Italian Painting," 407, 409.

Carrà began to incorporate references to African sculpture at around the same time that Soffici discussed primitivism in *La Voce*, and Bassani has dated Carrà's reliance on these sources between 1911 and 1916.⁵⁵ He also mentions specific borrowings, since *Portrait of Russolo* resembles Fang masks, while *Composition with the Head of a Woman* recalls a Lega sculpture in the collection of Paul Guillaume, de Chiricos' Parisian dealer and one of the earliest promoters of African art; the same head is adapted in later works such as *L'Antigrazioso* (1916). Despite Carrà's formal and conceptual debt to African sculpture until about 1922, Bassani explains that after 1916, he abandoned these sources, noting that Italy's lack of colonies contributed to the general disinterest in primitivism.⁵⁶ However, Carrà retained his early primitivist works' sincerity and awkwardness as well as some of Cubism's formal elements. Additionally, his primitivism developed obliquely, contradicted the artist's writings, and complicated his critical reception, well into the late 1930s.

Carrà's early primitivist drawings of his friends were based upon a close observation of African art and French modernism, and this is also true of his futurist paintings. For instance, his seminal work *La Galleria di Milano* (1912; Fig. 6) adapted cubist representations of volume to depict a famous café according to Futurist tenets. The work's structure and figural scale abandoned the references to masks in favor of a volumetric treatment. The large figure in the background, a waiter, retains African sculpture's rhythms, which had been adapted by Picasso and Braque; it also evokes Cubism's plasticity, which Soffici linked to African art in 1911. Carrà also included shapes that evoke masks and sculptures in the futurist work *Rhythms of Objects* (1911). The point here is not that the artist was looking at specific examples of African art, but that these important Futurist paintings included figures that *resembled* or *recalled* the effects of African art on Picasso, contradicting the artist's statements regarding his disinterest in primitivism.

Although some of Carrà's works seem inspired by primitive sources or their effects on Cubism, his writings discredited them. For instance, he was the co-author of *La Pittura futurista. Manifesto tecnico* (1910), which despite proclaiming that the futurists were "primitivi di una nuova sensibilità" ("primitives of a new sensibility"), denounced archaism.⁵⁷ The manifesto also sought to look at the world through the eye of a "primitive," and also claimed that the eye should be freed from atavism, culture, and museums.⁵⁸ In many ways, this manifesto's unclear relationship to African art reflects Carrà's contradictory dependence on it. As in Soffici's contemporaneous writings, it praised sincerity.⁵⁹ Finally, Carrà's manifesto's ambivalence towards the "primitive" was also present in his works from 1911 and 1912.⁶⁰

Carrà's eventually rejected African sculptures in favor of a futurist aesthetic close to popular art and modern life. In 1914, he wrote an article for Soffici's magazine *Lacerba* that expanded Futurism beyond violence, technology, and urban life, claiming that "exotic" primitivism had been a mistake.⁶¹ He noted that the *Manifesto tecnico* had intended to correct France's reliance on primitivism and proposed looking at popular or folk art due to its anti-intellectual nature,

⁵⁵ Ibid., 409.

⁵⁶ Ibid., 411.

⁵⁷ Umberto Boccioni et al., *Futurist Painting. Technical Manifesto*, in *Futurism: An Anthology*, ed. Lawrence S. Rainey, Christine Poggi, and Laura Wittman (New Haven, CT and London: Yale University Press, 2009), 67.

⁵⁸ Ibid., 66.

⁵⁹ Ibid.

⁶⁰ Boccioni's paintings' and sculptures' exploration of African sources as well as his writings demonstrate that other futurists were also contemplating primitivism.

⁶¹ Carlo Carrà, "Vita moderna e arte popolare," *Lacerba* 2, no. 2 (1914): 167-68.

observation of life, and search for true and eternal plastic laws.⁶² These were the very “eternal plastic” laws that Soffici had claimed were present in the works of the Italian primitive painters and in African sculptures in 1911. This interest in recovering the timeless essence of Italian art and in creating something primordial and modern led Carrà to abandon Futurism, but the effects of African art continued to appear in his works.



Fig. 6. Carlo Carrà, *La Galleria di Milano*, 1912. Photo: Art Resource, New York.

Carrà’s article on Futurism and folk art was followed by several post-futurist works, which also turned towards Rousseau. Although the previously discussed portrait of his friend Russolo and other portraits executed before the war exhibit certain traits or motifs likely derived from masks, Carrà’s post-futurist efforts incorporated solidity, sincerity, and awkwardness. This is evident in *I Romantici* (1916), which displays a blend of child-like awkwardness reminiscent of

⁶² Ibid.

Rousseau.⁶³ It is likely that Carrà was also looking at Masaccio, Cézanne, and Derain, as well as at African and perhaps Oceanic works.⁶⁴ Like Soffici, he praised the Italian primitives by writing two seminal articles for *La Voce* in 1916, “Parlata sul Giotto” and “Paolo Uccello costruttore,” which focused on these artists’ plasticity and sincerity.⁶⁵ Thus, his dismissal of African sources in writing was complemented by a number of texts that allowed him to retain some qualities ascribed to the former.

Carrà’s post-futurist eventually took on a metaphysical aesthetic, and he continued to emphasize solidity. As Fagiolo dell’Arco has written, paintings like *I Romantici* opposed Futurism’s dynamism and decomposition of form.⁶⁶ Instead, they blended African art’s solidity with an interest in folk and naïve art. However, dell’Arco discards Bassani’s affirmations regarding Carrà’s formal debt to African art, preferring to believe the artist’s assertions regarding his preference for Rousseau, the Italian primitives, and the art of children and the insane.⁶⁷ Despite dismissing African art in the Futurist manifesto and in *Lacerba*, Carrà retained the trademark “slice of brie nose” in several of his post-futurist naïve works, which has been associated with African masks.⁶⁸ More importantly, he returned to Cubism after 1916, the year in which Bassani claims Carrà’s primitivism ended.

Carrà’s article from 1914, “La Deformazione nella pittura,” also published in *Lacerba*, simultaneously rejects and depends on African art.⁶⁹ In it, he defends formal deformation. In this article, Carrà discussed deformation with respect to Cézanne, a European modern classic.⁷⁰ He also explained that deformation was one of contemporary painting’s most important elements, since it allowed artists to move beyond naturalism.⁷¹ Although the artist used a language derived from Futurism, Cézanne, and Cubism, he does not mention African art. However, he could not help but mentioning deformation and primitivism when he affirmed that:

La deformazione è un ALTIMETRO che ci dà gradi d’espressione plastica a cui giunge un’opera d’arte.

Gli aggettivi di “primitivo” di “grande” sono troppo vaghi, indeterminati, elastici per non prestarsi all’equivoco.

Ognuno può vedere primitivo e grande il pittore più borghese, più imbecille del mondo.⁷²

(Deformation is an ALTIMETER that measures the degrees of plastic expression reached by a work of art. The adjectives “primitive” and “large” are too vague, indeterminate, elastic to not lend themselves to equivocation. Anyone can see as primitive and large the most bourgeois painter, the most idiotic one on earth.)

⁶³ Maurizio Fagiolo dell’Arco, *Classicismo pittorico: metafisica, Valori plastici, realismo magico e “900”* (Genoa: Costa & Nolan, 1991), 90.

⁶⁴ Bassani, “Italian Painting,” 407.

⁶⁵ Carlo Carrà, “Parlata su Giotto,” *La Voce*, March 31, 1916, and id., “Paolo Uccello costruttore,” *La Voce*, November 30, 1916.

⁶⁶ Dell’Arco, *Classicismo pittorico*, 84.

⁶⁷ Ibid., 87.

⁶⁸ Bassani, “Italian Painting,” 408.

⁶⁹ Carrà, “La deformazione nella pittura,” *Lacerba* 2, no. 6 (1914): 93-94.

⁷⁰ Ibid., 94

⁷¹ Ibid., 93-94.

⁷² Ibid., 94.

This discards any debt to the “exotic” while retaining its elongating effects on form via deformation; it shows that despite Carrà’s abandonment of African art, he was still dealing with its effects on modern painting. Paradoxically, his criticism took advantage of primitivism’s elasticity in order to shift from African to Italian primitive sources.

Although Savinio gave a conference about African art in 1914 in New York, most of the paintings executed by the two other artists affiliated with the metaphysical school, Carrà and de Chirico, appear to be devoid of it. Merjian has traced references to archaism and primitivism in certain works by de Chirico, but Carrà’s *Penelope* (1918) was perhaps the only metaphysical work that explicitly returned to Cubism’s debt to African art.⁷³ This work depicts a mannequin, a common subject in metaphysical works, within an empty room. Both the room’s floor and the figure itself are fractured, suggesting Cubism, and the figure recalls the waiter from *La Galleria*. Penelope’s silhouette also recalls Carl Einstein’s first treatise on African sculpture, *Negerplastik*, which was influenced by his study of Cubism’s plasticity, since the figure resembles their focus on the wooden sculptures’ structure and rhythm.⁷⁴ Finally, *Penelope*’s debt to African sculptures is also suggested by the title of an earlier drawing of the same subject, *L’Idolo (Penelope)* (1914).

In *Penelope*, Carrà likely returned to a volumetric rendition somewhat similar to that of *La Galleria* because it allowed him to locate the work’s meaning within a single figure. This choice, which was not the norm in other metaphysical paintings by him, renders his debt to Cubism and African art all the more evident. The figure is not very elongated, but its proportions and the space that surrounds it are more or less in line with what he had written about painterly deformation in *Lacerba* in 1914, in which he linked this with Cubism. According to Carrà, Matisse, Derain, and Picasso had taken up the deformation present in the works of Manet, Renoir, and Cézanne:

A questo gruppo di artisti spetta il grandissimo merito di aver portato il quadro ad una sintesi di costruzione antiepisodica ignorata completamente dagli antichi. Rompendo gli schemi prospettici, allargando ed approfondendo le ricerche spaziali e plasticità dei corpi e della luce, deformando in una parola la realtà apparente, preparavano fatalmente l’avvento della pittura futurista.⁷⁵

(These artists have the great merit of taking painting towards an anti-episodic constructive synthesis completely ignored by the ancients. By breaking with perspectival schemes, elongating, and leading towards a more profound spatial research and plasticity of bodies and light, by deforming in essence, visible reality, they fatally prepared the advent of futurist painting.)

Here, the deformation of reality is seen as a positive quality. Given that African art led artists from Carrà’s generation to deform and reconfigure the human body, it is unsurprising that the artist would find himself reaching for solutions that recalled these wooden sculptures as late as 1918. Although Carrà lists other sources in his writings that addressed metaphysical painting, his formal solutions between 1911 and 1918, whether in his drawings’ faces or in his paintings’

⁷³ See Merjian, “Untimely Objects.”

⁷⁴ For a discussion on modernism and photographs of African sculpture, see Messina, “Un’illustrazione di *Emporium* 1922 e la fotografia della ‘scultura negra’ intorno al secondo ventennio del Novecento,” in *Emporium II. Parole e Figure tra il 1895 e il 1964*, ed. G. Bacci and M. Fileti (Mazza, Pisa: Edizioni della Normale, 2014), 431-52; and S.Z. Strother, “Looking for Africa in Carl Einstein’s *Negerplastik*,” *African Arts* 46, no. 4 (2013): 8-21.

⁷⁵ Carrà, “La deformazione nella pittura,” 94.

deformed or elongated volumes, often recalled the effects of African art on modernism. This speaks not only of Cubism's continuing influence after the "return to order," but also of the difficulty artists had in eradicating all ties to "exotic" primitivism. Additionally, the metaphysical school's reliance on mannequins facilitated the artist's reliance on volumetric forms derived from African sculptures.

After the war, Carrà continued to collaborate with de Chirico and Savinio in the magazine *Valori Plastici*. This magazine was tied to the Italian tradition and examined Cubism, Futurism, Expressionism, Constructivism, and even the work of Kandinsky. For the most part, however, these groups were rejected, since the magazine sought a style based on the Italian tradition. It published Carrà's nationalist articles, "L'italianismo artistico" and "André Derain," whose sentiments were not unlike de Chirico's and Savinio's contributions.⁷⁶ For instance, Messina has detected Savinio's ethnic characterization of style in "Anadioménon. Principi di valutazione dell'Arte contemporanea," which was amplified by de Chirico's affirmation that metaphysical art could only be Italian.⁷⁷ In general, *Valori Plastici's* emphasis on the Italian tradition and ethnic origins contributed to discredit the effects of African art. However, this program was undermined by several of Carrà's works reproduced within the magazine (see Fig. 7). A number of them displayed a geometric archaism that, despite being grounded in the Italian primitives, evoked the "exotic". Moreover, Carrà continued to write about primitivism, African art, and Derain.



Fig. 7. Carlo Carrà, *Lot's Daughters*, 1919. Photo: Art Resource, New York.

⁷⁶ Carlo Carrà, "L'italianismo artistico," *Valori Plastici* 1, no. 4-5 (1919): 1-5, and id., "André Derain," *Valori Plastici* 3, no. 3 (1921): 63-68. See Messina, "L'espressionismo nell'area di *Valori Plastici*," in *L'espressionnisme: une construction de l'autre = L'espressionismo una costruzione d'alterità*, ed. Maria Grazia Messina and Dominique Jarrassé (Paris: Éditions Esthétiques du Divers, 2012), 65-66; Alberto Savinio, "Anadioménon. Principi di valutazione dell'Arte contemporanea," *Valori Plastici* 1, no. 4-5 (1919): 6-14; and Giorgio de Chirico, "Sull'arte metafisica," *Valori Plastici* 1, no. 4-5 (1919): 15-18.

⁷⁷ Messina, "L'espressionismo nell'area di *Valori Plastici*," 66.

The fact that Carrà wrote about African art and its legacy via his discussion of Derain as late as 1921 demonstrates its continuing importance within the Italian scene. Other than defending the Italian tradition, Carrà's article attacked certain aspects of French modernism and its primitivism. Despite finding some positive aspects, he decried Derain's "negrismo" and archaism.⁷⁸ According to him, these efforts were not regulated by a rule or law, and he also noted that Derain mistakenly sought the solution to plastic questions by focusing on motifs, not volumes.⁷⁹ This emphasis on volume, or plasticity, over the "motif," brings to mind Carrà's abandonment of his early mask-like portraits, and in that sense, functioned as a recommendation to avoid evoking the Other's facial features.

Much like de Chirico and Savinio's nationalism, Carrà's attacks against modernist primitivism developed a racist discourse, and he emphasized Derain's "savagery" over his sincerity. According to him, Derain's archaism was unoriginal and uncivilized, since it descended from Picasso's "cubismo e selvaggismo."⁸⁰ This anticipated Soffici's *Strapaese's* attack against the avant-gardes, and contributed to the consolidation of a racist and anti-Semitic discourse against modernism during the late 1930s.⁸¹

Carrà's continuing dependence on primitivism manifested itself during the 1922 Biennale in Venice, in which two of his paintings were shown as part of a retrospective of Amedeo Modigliani's *oeuvre*. Both *La Casa dell'amore* (1922; Fig. 8) and *I Dioscuri* (1922) evoke Picasso's paintings of young men on the beach and their archaism. The figure's facial features recall Carrà's previous reliance on African masks and sculptures in his drawings. In doing so, they contradicted his previous condemnation of Derain's works.⁸² Carrà's paintings could be indebted to wooden sculptures from Easter Island, but regardless of their immediate sources, they evoked a primitivism that was not necessarily fully Italian.⁸³ This was heightened by the setting, since the works by Modigliani on view at the Biennale also incorporated primitivism. Unfortunately for Carrà, his works' primitivism was further magnified by the small exhibition of African sculpture at the Biennale.⁸⁴

The painting's archaic atmosphere and its figures' facial features led critics to read Carrà's works in light of Modigliani and the African sculptures. It is possible that these critics were also familiar with Carrà's early mask-like portraits, which had been reproduced in *La Raccolta*. While Carrà's essay on Derain had rejected African art's influence, the exhibition's organizers, archaeologist Carlo Anti and anthropologist Aldobrandino Mocchi, proposed that it was a valuable example of primordial art, which could inspire artists due to its sincerity and spontaneity.⁸⁵ Much like Soffici and Carrà had done in the past, they highlighted elements from African art that could be translated without threatening Italy's tradition.

⁷⁸ Carrà, "André Derain," 64.

⁷⁹ *Ibid.*, 65.

⁸⁰ *Ibid.*, 66. Carrà also accused primitivism of being primordial, snobbish, transitory, and with no aesthetic importance. He likewise tied this aesthetic to savage and mercantile Jews, likely art dealers, who were clinically destructive.

⁸¹ Anti-semitism became more prominent in Italy after it signed the Pact of Steel with Germany in 1936 and passed the *Leggi razziali* in 1938.

⁸² Emanuele Greco, "L'arte negra alla Biennale di Venezia del 1922. Ricostruzione del dibattito critico sulle riviste italiane," *Annali. Dipartimento di Storia del Storia delle Arti e dello Spettacolo. Università degli Studi di Firenze* 11 (2010): 366.

⁸³ Bassani, "Italian Painting," 411.

⁸⁴ Greco, "L'arte negra," 366.

⁸⁵ See Carlo Anti, "Mostra di scultura negra," in *Catalogo della XIII Esposizione internazionale d'arte della città di Venezia* (Milan: Bestetti & Tumminelli, 1922), 41.



Fig. 8. Carlo Carrà, *La Casa dell'amore*, 1922. Photo: Art Resource, New York.

Although there was some interest in them, critics claimed that the African works were inferior and savage, and a number of them associated Carrà with these works.⁸⁶ For example, Enrico Thovez stated that he remained unconvinced by Carrà's attempt to make an Italian art, and that the African works had a higher artistic level.⁸⁷ Soffici recognized that Carrà and Modigliani were talented but rejected their stylized works, indirectly acknowledging Carrà's interest in elongation and deformation.⁸⁸ Antonio Muñoz sided with Thovez, preferring the African works to Carrà's and Modigliani's intellectualism.⁸⁹ These critical responses were not as damning as future accusations against Carrà, but they associated this artist with primitivism *in spite of* his written condemnation of it.

Although his works from the mid-1920s onwards were mostly landscapes, Carrà discussed deformation once again in 1932, and essentially repeated his statements from 1914. In an article for *L'Ambrosiano*, he mentions primitivism only to note that deformation was a broader term that included not only primitivism, but also "stilismo," or stylized forms.⁹⁰ He acknowledged that although deformation was often seen as a "monstruosità iconografica" ("iconographic monstrosity"), it focused on elongating bodies, on deepening their plasticity, and on breaking with reality.⁹¹ In many ways, despite the fact that eighteen years had gone by, Carrà's position on deformation and primitivism had not changed substantially. More importantly, when writing about deformation, he referred to the primitive, even if only to discredit it.

In 1938, Carrà was forced to address accusations that modernism endangered the purity of Italian race and culture.⁹² This responded to the racism prevalent during the late 1930s. In particular, this statement seems to be responding to Telesio Interlandi, director of *La Difesa della razza*, who attacked modern artists due to their alleged Judaism and reliance on foreign sources.⁹³ Carrà did not discuss primitivism, but his article recalls de Chirico's and Savinio's language in *Valori Plastici*, in that he addresses race obliquely and refers to Italy's cultural superiority. In essence, he argued that Italian modernism was imbricated with the rise of Fascism.⁹⁴ He also maintained that despite the use of foreign sources, most artists retained the "attitudini perenni della stirpe" ("stock's perennial attitudes"), a reference to lineage and ancestry to assure the purity of Italy's tradition or race.⁹⁵ This discussion also recalls the reception of Carrà's works at the Biennale in 1922, which tied modernism, race, and national origin. Although the terms had shifted, Carrà's pre-war criticism of modernist primitivism was an early expression of racism and colonialism. Additionally, these attitudes anticipated Interlandi's racism and anti-Semitism.

⁸⁶ Greco, "L'arte negra," 363-65. Per Greco, critics Diego Valeri, Francesco Saponi, and Decio Buffoni noted that the art did not belong there, was naïve, lacked "cultural limits," or was a mere curiosity. Margherita Sarfatti was uninterested in them formally, but appreciated their intuition and spirituality, which she linked to liberation (ibid., 364).

⁸⁷ Ibid.

⁸⁸ Ibid., 365.

⁸⁹ Ibid.

⁹⁰ Carlo Carrà, "Taccuino di note," *L'Ambrosiano* (August 25, 1932). Cited in Vittorio Fagone, *L'arte all'ordine del giorno: figure e idee in Italia da Carrà a Birolli* (Milan: Feltrinelli, 2001), 84 (see also 317n6).

⁹¹ Fagone, *L'arte*, 84.

⁹² Carlo Carrà, "Arte e razza," *L'Ambrosiano* (December 8, 1938). Reprinted in *Il Premio Bergamo 1939-1942: documenti, lettere, biografie*, ed. Marco Lorandi, Fernando Rea, and Chiara Tellini Perina (Milan: Electa, 1993), 58-60.

⁹³ Telesio Interlandi, "Dichiarazioni di Interlandi," in "Note. Discussioni sull'arte moderna," *Le Arti* 1, no. 2 (1938). Reprinted in *Il Premio Bergamo*, 50-52.

⁹⁴ Ibid., 58.

⁹⁵ Ibid., 59.

Conclusion

During Fascism, *Strapaese* sought to defend “the true Italy,” which it defined as rural, traditional, and tied to the art of the early Renaissance. At the same time, it opposed cosmopolitanism, Judaism, Fordism, Futurism, rationalist architecture, and Fascism’s *romanità*. This movement was greatly indebted to Soffici’s renouncement of African sources and subsequent emulation of Tuscan folk art. Additionally, this shift towards a ruralism continued to deploy a rhetorical strategy in which foreign “primitive” sources were praised or rejected according to the needs of artists, critics, and the regime. As such, the several qualities which Soffici had attributed to the African sculptures were merely (re)mapped onto more acceptable sources such as Rousseau and Tuscan vernacular architecture.

Although Soffici successfully left African art behind, Carrà’s “Italianate” archaism, developed after 1919 or so, was read as “exotic.” This initiated a pattern within his critical reception. Although important portion of his production during Facism was made up of landscapes and he received commissions from the regime, he was accused of denigrating the Italian race in 1938, adding yet another layer to his complex denial of African sources.⁹⁶ Unfortunately for him, his earlier attempts to disavow these sources contributed to the establishment of a racist and anti-primitivist critical discourse.

As mentioned above, Soffici’s and Carrà’s entanglement with primitivism was part of a broader process in which Italian national identity was reinforced via the evocation of “exotic” and internal Others. In a sense, both African sources and folk art aided these artists in creating works tied to tradition and modernity. However, despite Soffici’s affirmations that African art and Cubism’s plasticity were also tied to Giotto, the rise of fascist colonialism precipitated different responses to primitivism. While the Futurists continued to incorporate primitive and modern sources, racist critics attacked modernism in general, whether primitivist or not. This primitivism seems to have reached its apex shortly before and during World War I as well as during the 1930s, and it continued Italy’s nationalist and imperialist discourse, which emerged during the nation’s Liberal era.

As mentioned above, Italian primitivism was part of a global exchange, and it also responded to the canonization of European modernism. Thus, the erasure or relativization of African art’s contribution to Italian modernism was also part of the consolidation of Post-Impressionism, Fauvism, and Cubism’s place within the canon. In fact, early attempts to historicize the art of modernity have minimized the role of exotic sources, preferring narratives articulated around formalist concerns and a linear path towards abstraction.⁹⁷ Erasing such sources rendered these movements fully European and continues to determine how we approach modernism. This process was heightened in Italy, since its fascist period has led to an uneven historization of its modernism that was not successfully contested until the last quarter of the twentieth century. For example, references to Fascism were all but absent in an exhibit devoted to Italian modernism at the Museum of Modern Art in 1949. In general, we can conclude that the dismissal of African art occurred during three moments: 1) c. 1913-22, when artists such as Soffici and Carrà sought to abandon African sources in the years around World War I; 2) during the late 1930s, when this

⁹⁶ See Anonymous, “Le opere di certi modernisti è chiaro che denigrano la razza,” *Perseo* (January 10, 1938). Works by Giorgio Morandi, Arturo Martini, Marino Marini, Lucio Fontana, and Corrado Cagli were also criticized in this article.

⁹⁷ This occurred during Alfred H. Barr’s tenure as director of the Museum of Modern Art, for instance. See *Cubism and abstract art painting, sculpture, constructions, photography, architecture, industrial art, theatre, films, posters, typography* (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 1936).

process was reinforced by Fascism's colonialism and racism; and 3) during the post-war period, when it was further developed by an initial refusal to fully acknowledge Fascism's and African art's contribution to modernism.

The persistence of "exotic" primitivism and its mutation into an art rooted in the peasantry during Fascism suggests that it is crucial to rescue how "exotic" sources were whitewashed. While I have focused on Soffici and Carrà, their dismissal of Africa and its art show that appropriation can go hand-in-hand with concealment. This process seems to be typical of Italy's relative unwillingness to deal with its colonial legacy. Moreover, the post-war refusal to recognize that Fascism had produced works art echoed earlier attacks against African art. In any case, both Fascism and exotic sources were carefully denied an active role within the history of modernism.

After the war, artists continued to avoid acknowledging primitivism's role within Fascism. This occurred in the work of individuals such as Mirko Basaldella, who created sculptures and paintings devoid of colonial references. His works were tied to an expressionist vein in Italian art pursued by groups such as Corrente and the *scuola romana*, efforts which were often denounced due to their "degenerate" elongations and primitivism by radicals such as Interlandi.⁹⁸ Basaldella's post-war sculptures sometimes recalled the vertical and compact representation of volume in Cubism and its reliance on African sculptures. In many ways, his evident debt to Cubism demonstrates that this artist was uninterested in finding new ways of engaging with Africa or its art. Needless to say, this curious return elided Italian colonialism and the numerous manifestations of primitivism that emerged during the regime as well as the works of important precursors such as Soffici and Carrà. This erasure of the previous ways in which primitivism had been adjusted to construct a racial and cultural identity is telling, and claims that Basaldella's works are universal are yet another example of this complicated dynamic of recognition and disavowal.

⁹⁸ For more on late Fascism's persecution of modernism, see Francesco Cassata, *"La Difesa della razza" Politica, ideologia e immagine del razzismo fascista* (Turin: Einaudi, 2008), Chapter 6.