

## The dangers of repatriating historical artifacts

By Dominic Standish

The impressive 24-meter obelisk in Rome's Piazza di Porta Capena is a 1,700-year-old monument from Aksum, the ancient Ethiopian capital. According to Italy's Culture Ministry, the Aksum Obelisk will be dismantled over the next six months in preparation for its return to Ethiopia in the summer.

The obelisk was brought to Italy from Ethiopia on the orders of the fascist dictator Benito Mussolini and was erected in 1937 to mark the 15th anniversary of his march on Rome. It was placed in front of the Ministry of the Colonies, now the United Nations Food and Agriculture Organization.

You don't have to be a fascist sympathizer to consider the benefits of the obelisk remaining in Rome. The obelisk stands in a busy piazza in one of the world's cultural capitals, facing the premises of an important international body. Here numerous tourists and others can appreciate it in a unique context among Rome's wealth of historical monuments.

Repatriating the obelisk to Aksum does have the advantage that it will be returned to its original context among other monuments in the ancient Ethiopian capital. But who will go and see the obelisk in the small town of Aksum?

That city is 1,000 kilometers from the current Ethiopian capital, Addis Ababa. It has few hotels or paved roads and unreliable water and electric supplies. In addition, moving the obelisk back to Aksum involves many risks to its structure.

The frailty of the obelisk was highlighted when it was struck by lightning last May, knocking off two meters of stone. A debate began over whether the lightning strike would postpone or speed up the obelisk's repatriation. Italy had earlier promised to return the obelisk in 1947, 1956 and 1997.

Was it the lightning that jolted the Italian government into action? Or maybe it was the Ethiopian government's statement that "the Italian government could be held responsible for the serious damage caused by the lightning"? The timing of the return of the obelisk is not a coincidence. It is not even the result of strenuous campaigning by the Aksum Obelisk Return Committee.

Rather, the current Italian government is actively encouraging the repatriation of historical objects. Witness last October's offer to return a fragment of the fifth century B.C. Parthenon marbles to Greece on a 99-year loan by the Salinas Regional Archaeological Museum in Sicily. "This kind of initiative can only impoverish our museum and deprive us of a piece that is part of our collection's identity," said Agata Villa, the director of the museum's classical archaeology department.

The Italian offer was in contrast to the British government's opposition to repatriating the bulk of the Parthenon statues, known as the Elgin Marbles, from London's British Museum, but it was in line with a new trend. From Australia to the United States over the last ten years, governments and leading cultural institutions have increasingly offered to repatriate artifacts as cultural relativism has become intellectually dominant. Items have been returned as acts of respect for indigenous peoples, especially victims of colonialism.

Indeed, the Aksum Obelisk will be repatriated to Italy's former colony of Ethiopia, as pledged by Prime Minister Silvio Berlus-

coni. Returning such artifacts represents an opportunity for Berlusconi to demonstrate his own cultural relativism. He hasn't forgotten the damage done to his reputation after he was widely condemned for his comments on the superiority of Western civilization over Islam.

But encouraging the repatriation of historical objects could lead to many future conflicts. Other countries may not be willing to return many Italian artifacts, and we can expect others to make claims on objects held in Italy.

Now a campaign has begun for the return of the bones of St. Nicholas to Turkey from a church in Bari, where they are secured in blocks of concrete. According to Rev. Gerardo Cioffari, historian at the St. Nicholas Basilica, the bones will never be given back. "If the remains were moved there would be a revolution here," he said.

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## TV starlets reveal little more than inertia in the media

By Nina Rothenberg

obias Jones' article on Italian TV in the Financial Times caused a big stir in Italy. Once again, the Italians' tendency to self-deprecation over their nation's flaws and vices turned into sore indignation as soon as Anglo-Saxons attacked the "Bel paese", which is quite understandable, as for decades Anglo-American scholars have treated Italy to a diet of snobbish arrogance and latent ethnocentrism.

That primetime Italian television is rather bizarre, not only to the foreign eye, and that women are predominantly portrayed as frilly, infantile sex toys, is largely undisputed even in Italy. That the programs, except for some honorable exceptions, are uninspiring is widely acknowledged too. It is the claim that women's representation on Italian TV makes it "the country feminism truly forgot" that, in my opinion, is a reiteration of the stereotype "Italians are backward" and represents a historical misjudgment.

The pitiful representation of women on Italian television is less due to a lack of feminism than to specific economic and social circumstances within Italian society. Italian capitalism is based far more than in other countries on the family, which offers what the Italian welfare-state has never been able and willing to provide - cheap care for children and the elderly, free accommodation for the young, often under-paid work-force, and an environment that serves as a cozy refuge from harsh competition imposed by modern capitalism. The Italian family confines women to more traditional roles, much as the hostile attitudes of fascism and the Catholic Church, contributed to set high obstacles to women's rights.

Contrary to popular belief, the Italian feminist movement was active, well-organized and produced an impressive variety of journals, magazines, publishing houses, bookshops and associations, many of which are still active today. However, the strong Marxist creed of most of the groups, such as Rivolta Femminile and Movimento di liberazione della donna added fashionable revolutionary verve, but also strongly confined their institutional impact.

In the 1960s and 1970s directors such as De Sica and Fellini

used simmering erotica and ostentatious sensuality as an act of rebellion against Catholic prudishness. Nowadays, short skirts and enticing behavior are an expression of the contrary: an infantile conception of objectified female sexuality, embodied in the eternally smiling, doll-like and therefore asexual images of "veline" and "letterine". The television critic Clive Barnes wrote that "television is the first truly democratic culture, the first available to everybody and entirely governed by what people want. The most terrifying thing is what people do want". However, it is questionable to what degree television in Italy really caters to people's demands.

Italian media are relatively untouched by, and insensitive to, the changes that occur within civil society. In the UK, even a conservative paper such as The Daily Telegraph had to defend its market share by accommodating a growing female readership through a different layout, different news-styles, a new language and by integrating more female commentators. In Italy, with the papers being more accessories of powerful economic interests than independent commercial actors, adaptations to market forces are slow and often half-hearted.

This inertia is also reflected in the television sector. Here Mediaset sets the pace of ennui while fat Mamma RAI shuffles behind, leading to a lack of competition and innovation, translating into mainly uncritical and deferential journalism. This is serious, considering that 50 percent of Italians relies exclusively on television as a source of information.

Feminists in Italy have attacked the media for their sexist content, and in her recent book the journalist Chiara Valentini denounced the discrimination and trivialization of women on Italian television. In a survey over 70 per cent of women declared themselves dissatisfied with their gender's portrayal on TV, but generally Italian women appear nonchalant on the issue. A friend sums it up by saying "Why should I get worked up about television, I have better things to do. I simply avoid watching these programs".

The media, the fourth estate of modern democracy, have kept Italian women out of power positions - a form of institutional autism as well as a strategy of defense towards change. Women in Italy as in Britain have tried to change society and the institutions, but economic and social forces are more powerful than any activist's good will.

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### Roman notes

## Ruins, food attract a new breed of tourist

By Anne Ruderman  
Special to Italy Weekly

The she-wolf of Roman legend has got some company. According to zoologists in Rome, the eternal city has recently become an animal kingdom, with some 26 mammals, 110 species of birds and 15 reptiles thriving in and about the historic center.

In the past 20 years, zoologists say, wild animals have increasingly encroached upon Rome, attracted by the warmth of the city in the winter, the network of ancient ruins and the bits and pieces of food tourists and Romans leave behind. "The animals have learned to use the city," said Bruno Cignini, a zoologist with the City.

According to Cignini there are now some 200 kestrels and 400 seagulls where there used to be 10 or 12. Foxes and small falcons have reappeared. The last count on starlings, first spotted in 1927, was 2 million. As far as wildlife is concerned, Cignini has his own version of 'all roads lead to Rome.' "Parks form a ring around the city, or a green belt," he said, surveying a map of the 130,000-hectare city, 67 percent of which he says is open space. "There are long strips of green that radiate inward, from the surrounding parks, linking the city and the countryside."

The Tiber also helps. "The Tiber is like a highway for animals," said Fulvio Fraticelli, the head of Rome's zoo, Bioparco. Some species, like the black crow, Fraticelli said have multiplied rapidly in recent years having overcome "the tipping point of conquering their environment."

Not that extra animals are always good news. Starlings, Cignini said, eat, sleep and leave their droppings en masse - and have a tendency to roost above traffic lights on busy streets - a bad combination for storeowners beneath.

The city now employs false distress calls to frighten the birds away from commercial areas. "We can't get them out of the city," Cignini said. "The best we can do is move them around."

Of course, to many, untrained in zoological observation, or perhaps fortunate enough not to notice an upsurge of starlings in the trees above, Rome's animal kingdom, especially along the Tiber, remain dominated by one species only: rats.

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