

ARTURO MEZZEDIMI

AFRICA HALL

A MONUMENT TO AFRICAN HISTORY

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AFRICA HALL
A MONUMENT TO AFRICAN HISTORY
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Limited Edition

/ 500

This volume is part of a limited edition of 500 uniquely numbered copies, published on the occasion of the inauguration of the renovated Africa Hall on October 21, 2024.

This book is not for sale.

edited by
Marcello Mezzèdimi



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CHAPTER 1

1940s-1970s

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

Emperor Haile Selassie I of Ethiopia makes an official inspection of his troops in Addis Ababa in the 1950s. Behind him (right) is his son, Crown Prince Asfaw Wossen, and (left) Defense Minister Ras Abebe Aregai.



THE DIPLOMACY OF WORK

Notes on the Italian Community in post-World War II Ethiopia

Gianfrancesco Lusini

Translated by
Mirella Daniel

When on February 6, 1961 Africa Hall (የአፍሪካ አዳራሽ *Yä'afrika Addaras'*), which is still today the permanent seat of the United Nations Economic Commission for Africa (UNECA), was inaugurated, twenty years had passed from the moment in which Ethiopia had officially regained its sovereignty. The five years of Italian occupation, in fact, came to an end with the return of the Ethiopian emperor in the capital of his country on May 5, 1941 deliberately coinciding with the fifth anniversary of the entrance of General Pietro Badoglio in Addis Ababa on May 5, 1936, heading his occupying and temporarily victorious army. History had taken its course attributing, as always, its rights and wrongs. The events in Ethiopia emerged as a substantial factor in the developments that led to the defeat of the Axis forces.

In this general scenario, well known and researched by generations of historians intent on reconstructing the events of war and diplomacy, numerous smaller narratives emerge, often storylines so small that they escape observation even under the lens of the most attentive researcher. We are speaking of tens of thousands of Italians who for three generations had migrated to Ethiopia together with their hopes, skills, and their willingness to work for the growth of the country. Women and men who had contributed—albeit within the context of privileges guaranteed by colonial laws—to the construction of infrastructure, to the development of business, to the modernizing of agriculture, and to the creation of new services not merely in the capital but in every corner of the country. In the matter of a few days, they suddenly found themselves facing an existential dilemma: leave and lose everything or stay and face the unknown.

In order to understand what happened during the twenty years culminating with the celebration of February 5, 1961, it is necessary to go back to May 5 of twenty years before, to the re-enthronement of Haile Selassie (*Haylä Səllase*) when he expressed his ideas, wishing to make them known in Ethiopia and abroad, with a speech that contained also a plan concerning relations with the Italians:

Today is the day when our enemy has been defeated and has fallen. Today for all of us is the day of the happiness we have gained by the grace of the Lord. Today for all of us there can't be anything but rejoicing in the spirit of Christ. Let us not repay evil with evil! Don't undertake acts of cruelty and violence in the way the enemy did! Don't try to behave in a manner that spoils the good name of Ethiopia, for our enemy is guilty of what happened.⁴¹

We could evaluate these words merely on an ethical plane, as an expression of the religious sensibility of the Ethiopian sovereign, educated in the study of the Gospel, but in this way, we would fail to grasp the implications of the political thought of Haile Selassie.

The day after May 5, 1941, Ethiopia became a country freed from the presence of the occupier, but it was facing a future with a long series of problems. Its position in the international arena did not guarantee its due respect, bearing in mind the continental context in which African countries were still for the most part subject to the control of Britain and France. Steering the ship of his country, while the war in Europe was still waging, was the major concern of the Ethiopian sovereign and not merely a direct interest in reinforcing his personal power. In fact, following

the thread of his original political agenda, which he pursued since his initial enthronement and before the war unleashed by fascist Italy, Haile Selassie believed in the modernization of Ethiopia and all of Africa. With political intelligence, he questioned the modalities of this process and the possible partners who could contribute to its realization.

Part of this scenario was the destiny of the thousands of Italians who had believed in a life project based on their immigration to Africa. They were laborers and technicians, artisans and office employees who were waiting to understand which direction to take within the framework of this radically changed political situation. Most of them chose the path of repatriation driven not only by evaluating their opportunities, but also by hasty instructions emanating from the new administrators. The English authorities, who occupied the capital from April 6, 1941, made no qualms about their intention to reduce both the social fabric of Italians living in Ethiopia and the bulk of economic activity in play. In December of the same year, a repatriation was organized involving the overwhelming majority of no less than twenty thousand Italians present in Addis Ababa.

There is some doubt about the true number of those who decided or were authorized to remain. Most probably the question was an object of friction and generated several positions. Understandably, the English point of view was to limit as far as possible the presence of Italian civilians in Africa (Ethiopia, but also Eritrea and Somalia) because they belonged to an enemy country and hostile regime. The sovereign and many of his most trusted counselors were of a different opinion. For Haile Selassie, openly supporting an effort to maintain a significant Italian presence not only weighed against the desire of the English to condition the Ethiopian decision regarding international relations, but also opened up the opportunity to fuel sectors of the economy based on professions and skills otherwise unavailable, from construction to transport, from medical care to production and distribution of hydroelectric energy.

In several memoir style publications one can read that under the British Administration, no more than 500 Italians were authorized to remain in Ethiopia. This information cannot be confirmed by any official documentation and seems to be the result of a downward estimate. It is more probable that the influence in the court, on the part of those who recognized the role played by Italians in Ethiopian soci-

ety, oriented the emperor himself toward a de facto attitude that was more indulgent toward the ex-enemy. Contributing to the development of the myth of the “Cinquecento d’Etiopia” (the 500 of Ethiopia) was the memory of the fate of another group of 500 Italians who had left a mark in Eritrea at the end of the nineteenth century, i.e. the components of the military column annihilated in the famously sad battle by the troops of Ras Alula at Dogali on January 26, 1887.

The Peace Treaty between Italy and the Allied forces signed in Paris on February 10, 1947 ruled only on questions pertinent to the transfer of territories and to war reparations between the victorious and the defeated of the worldwide conflict. The matter of the substantial presence of Italian workers, technicians, and artisans in Ethiopia was not included in the decision-making of the peace conference which took place in the French capital from July 29 until October 15, 1946. From this point of view, one can only imagine the sense of solitude that the Italians still residing in Ethiopia must have felt, torn between the sense of responsibility toward the past and the great uncertainty of the future. However, surprisingly, year after year the value of the impact of their activities grew and consolidated, nourished by a vibrant social life freed from the restraints of a colonial past and favored by the intelligence of the Ethiopian government.

About ten years later, on June 15, 1956, an agreement was reached between Italy and Ethiopia “for the regulation of economic and financial questions,” finally furnishing a frame of reference for intense bilateral relations hinged on the activities of many Italian families in Ethiopia. For years, these Italian families had been constructing a rich and dynamic network of productivity not only in the sectors in which Italians had traditionally and consistently been present, but also in the new industrial activities required by the agenda of development in this African country. Their resilience, favored *in primis* by the emperor and the people of Ethiopia who had prevented the phenomena of “collective revenge,” had thus allowed them to recreate a social and economic fabric which contributed to the promotion of Ethiopian growth.

In particular, the Italian community of Addis Ababa, who benefited from the contribution of hundreds of compatriots immigrating from Eritrea and from an ever more benevolent attitude on the part of the Ethiopian ruling class, continued to develop

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a more modern social structure, becoming a reference point for the economy of this African country with surprising rapidity. Italians interpreted their presence in Africa as an expression of the collective need to construct a new alternative identity as opposed to their old identity which was based on the project of political colonialism. People such as these were involved in activities which by now were highly qualified and in which the enterprising, industrial, professional, and commercial components had become a factor of development for an African country on the path of modernization.

In the Italian seat of government in Rome, the awareness of the importance of these processes grew and gradually became more imposing, finally giving concrete and long-lasting results. Reference is primarily made to the founding, in 1954, of the school “Galileo Galilei,” which underscores the central importance of education in the post-colonial relationship between the two countries. Unsurprisingly, in 1970 Arturo Mezzèdimi, one of the major exponents of Italian creativity and work in Ethiopia after World War II, was commissioned to design the complex which also includes the Italian Cultural Institute of Addis Ababa. Up until today this complex, which is the largest Italian school abroad, remains an eminent example of Italian architecture in the Ethiopian capital, a multifunctional center which, over time, has become a place of aggregation, education, and culture for generations of Italians and Ethiopians.

The construction of Africa Hall, with the decisive contribution of the company Luigi Varnero and of contractor Luigi Elmi for its extension in 1971–1976, marks the culmination of this particular and fortunate collective itinerary, showing that the times were ripe for the consolidating of a new phase of bilateral relations. It is important to underline that Italian labor in Ethiopia was an essential component of the process with which a climate of reciprocal trust was re-established between Italy, the country that only twenty years before had brought lethal weapons and occupying troops into Africa, and the Ethiopian people and its governing body, which was both the last to fall under the yoke of European colonial oppression and the first to liberate itself. The images of the architect Mezzèdimi and the emperor, who together inspected the construction site of Africa Hall, supervising the various phases of building, express emblematically the role—be it diplomatic, practical, or decisive—that Italian labor performed in Ethiopia in the years between 1941 and 1974.

Right
“I giornali sono arrivati (newspapers have arrived)” reads the notice in the newsagent’s window, alerting the Italian diaspora living in Addis Ababa in April 1966 to the arrival of news from home.





The cultural and commercial district of Arada Piazza has been at the crossroads of cultures since the foundation of Addis

Ababa. The Italian resident community shared its customs and traditions here, including those of gastronomy.



A new structure emerges for an office tower commissioned by the Haile Selassie I Foundation to the Italian contractor Ugolotti & Co.



Construction sites emerged throughout Addis Ababa in the 1960s. Mezzèdimi reflected in later life how the combination of the drive, ability,

and imagination of the Italian community and the talent for specialization and the efficiency of local labor were instrumental in the success of this period.

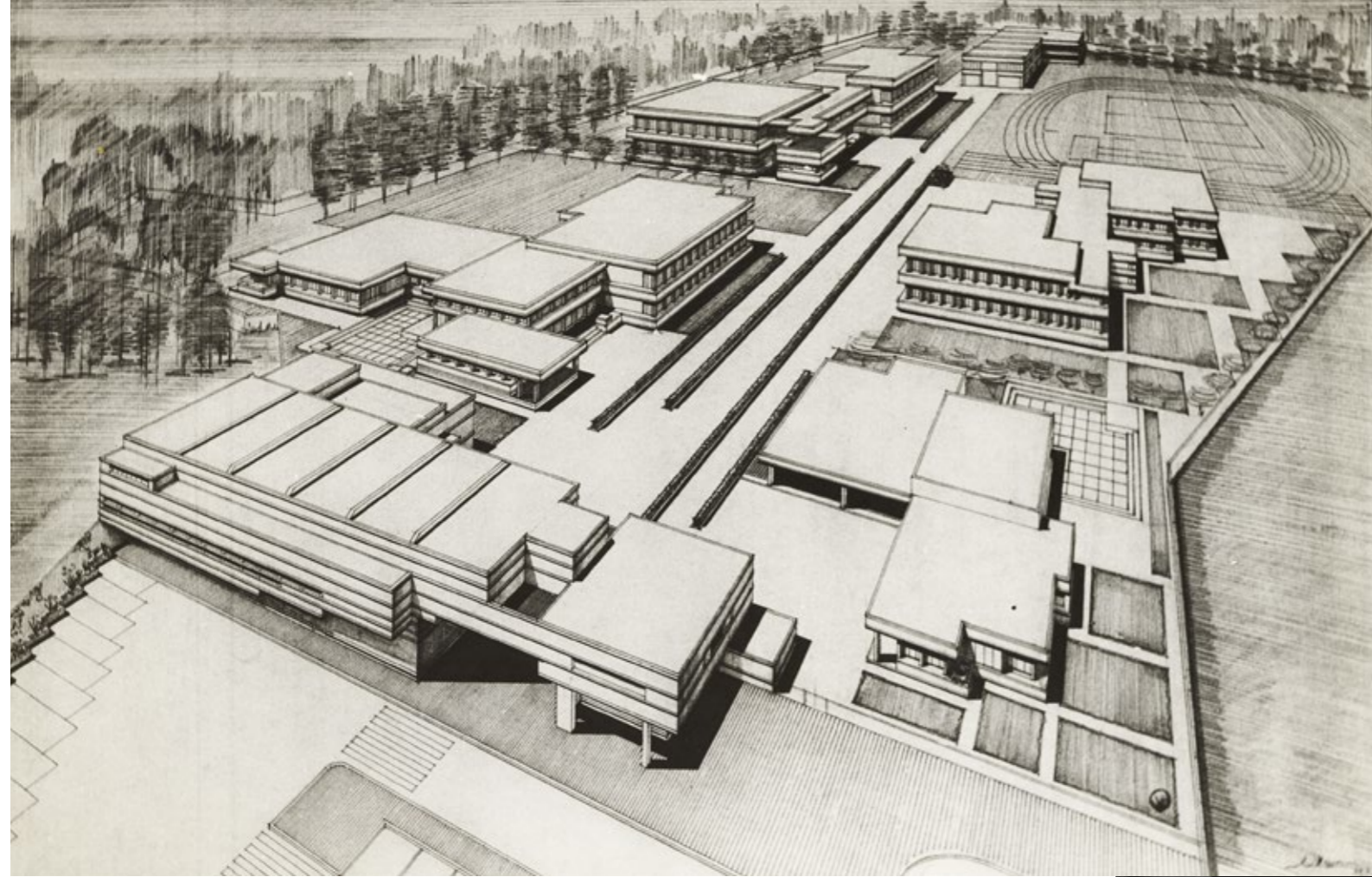


A building site of the Italian contractor Mantelli in Addis Ababa in November 1966. "Italians are the only ones who reinvest their profits in the country

and have demonstrated, of all Westerners, to be the best suited to collaborating and living alongside Ethiopians,"³⁹ confided Emperor Haile Selassie to Mezzèdimi.



End of lessons at the Italian School of Addis Ababa. Established in 1956, the institute offered its curriculum in both Amharic and Italian languages and was expanded into a new school and cultural center in 1974.



Perspective drawing and photograph of the new Italian School and Cultural Institute of Addis Ababa designed

by Mezzèdimi (1971-74). The institute remains the largest state school of Italy abroad and has educated thousands of

Ethiopian and Italian students, contributing to the enrichment and cultural awareness of the two communities.





The Italian communities of Ethiopia and Eritrea were deeply intertwined, with many Italians running business activities in

both countries. Social gatherings reminiscent of mainland Italy regularly took place in Asmara and Addis Ababa.

The Italian Club of Asmara had been a center of aggregation for decades, while the Juventus club of Addis Ababa, founded

in the early 1950s, hosted all types of activities from weddings to graduations, and post-work gatherings to bingo nights.



The entrance to the Italian Club of Asmara in the mid-1960s. The social club was housed in a 1915 neo-Baroque building originally designed for a bank and currently hosting a University of Asmara Training Center.



The Italian Industrial Exhibition was held in February 1968 in Mesqel Square, Addis Ababa, to enhance the economic relations between

Ethiopia and Italy and displaying various industrial sectors by companies such as Banco di Roma, Olivetti, Fiat, and SAME.

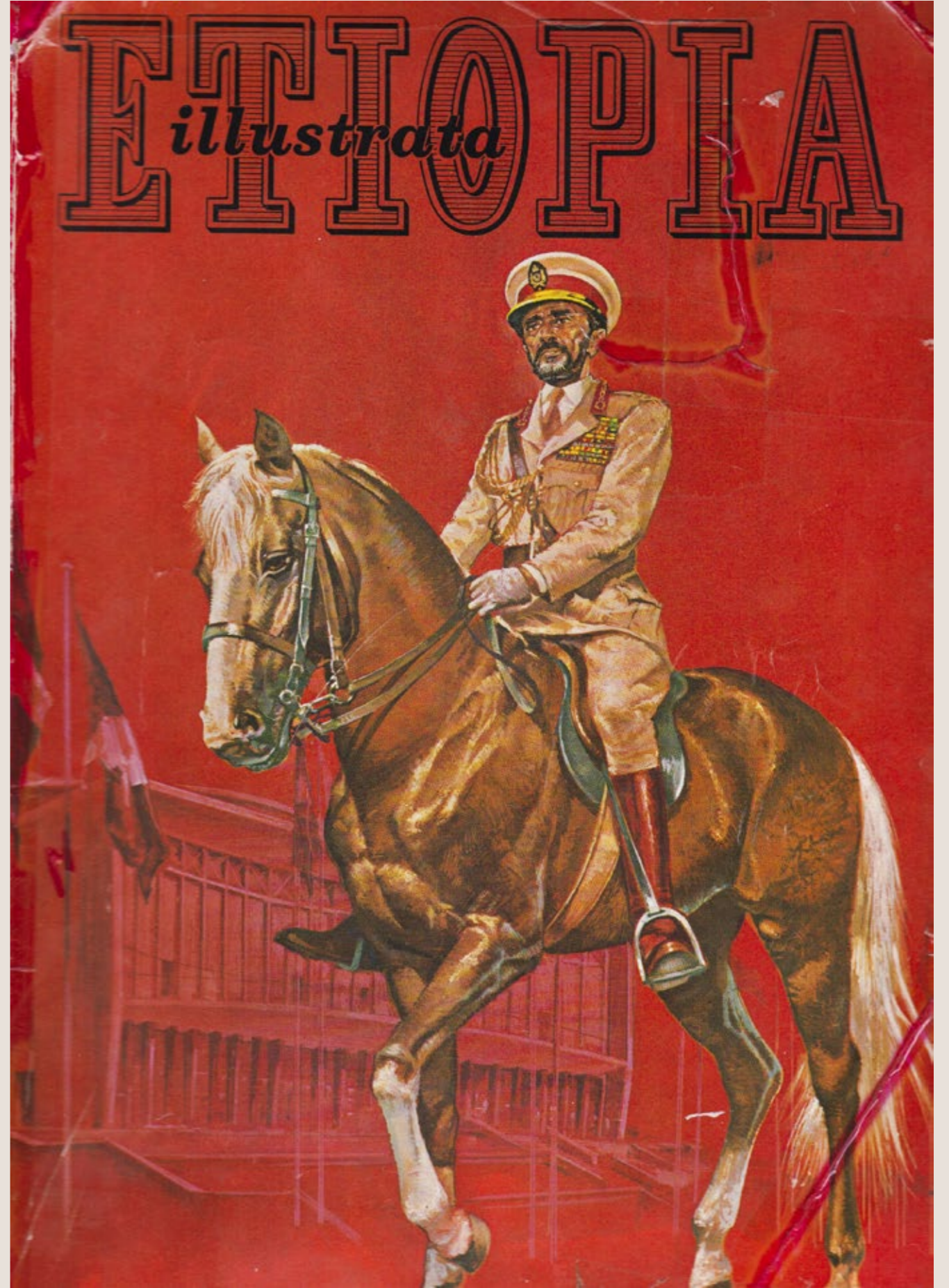


Ethiopian women working at the Italian Industrial Exhibition take a break from their duties, enjoying a conversation in the sun.



Collage of commercial advertisements published in the Italian magazine *Etiopia Illustrata* (Illustrated Ethiopia) during the mid-1960s by a variety of Italian companies operating in

Ethiopia and Eritrea. On the right, the magazine's cover for the December 1965 edition portrays Emperor Haile Selassie riding a horse in ceremonial uniform in front of Africa Hall.



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NOTE ON ETHIOPIAN NAMES AND TITLES

This book follows the naming convention whereby Ethiopians are identified by their first name alone, or by their first name followed by their father's first name.

For example, Afewerk Tekle is referred to either as “Afewerk” alone or as “Afewerk Tekle.” During his lifetime, he was primarily known by his first name and in later life also acquired the honorific epithets “Maître Artist World Laureate” or “Maître Artist Laureate.”

In general, Ethiopian names are often accompanied by honorific titles. In this book, the following ones appear:

Ato (Ato): Mr
Woizero (Wäyzäro): Mrs, Lady
Dejazmach (Däggazmačč): Count, Commander
Lij (Läǧ): Prince, male descendent of a noble or high-ranking family
Ras (Ras): Duke, Head (the highest rank below a Negus)
Negus (Nägus): King
Negusa Negast (Nägusä Nägäst): King of Kings, Emperor

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41. Translation by Gianfrancesco Lusini of the original Amharic text:
 ዛሬ ጠላታችን ድል ተመቻቸው የወደቀበት ቀን ነው። ዛሬ በእግዚአብሔር ቸርነት ያገኘነው የሁላችን የደስታ ቀን ነው። ዛሬ ሁላችንም ደስ የሚለን በክርስቶስ መንፈስ እንጂ፣ በሌላ መሆን የለበትም። በከፋ ክፉ አትመልሱ! ጠላት እንዳደረገው የጭካኔና የግፍ ሥራ አትሥሩ! የጠላታችን መወቀሻ በሆነው ነገር፣ የኢትዮጵያን መልካም ስም የሚያገራጅ ተግባር ለመፈጸም አትሞክሩ!
 Quoted from: ዘውዴ ረታ, የቀዳማዊ ኃይለሥላሴ መንግሥት, ፩ኛ መጽሐፍ, ፲፱፻፳፫-፲፱፻፵፰፣ ኢ.ኤ.አ 1930-1955, አዲስ አበባ, ሻማ ቡክስ, 2005 E.C. – Zäwde Rätta, Yäqädamawi *Hayläsäällase mängəst*, İna mäşhəf, 1923-1948 (= 1930-1955 G.C.), Addis Abäba, Şama Buks, 2005 E.C. (2012/13 G.C.).
 See also: Haile Selassie I, Speech Delivered by His Imperial Majesty Haile Selassie I to His People at His Palace on the Occasion of His Entry into Addis Ababa on the 27th Miazya in the year of grace 1933 (5th May, 1941) (London: Abyssinia Association, 1941)

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44. Please refer to the Note on Ethiopian Names and Titles at page 426.

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46. Embebet Zewde, *Be Landskape Arckitect: ye-Mejemeryaw Ethiopiyawi Engineer Getachew Mahteme Selassie* (2012).

47. Mario Fanano was in charge of the structural calculation while several other professionals were involved in the desing effort, including Gildo Bistrot, Ernesto Scotti, Gianni Cravero, Guido Baldini, and Giovanni Gravanti for the technical drawings and models; Enzo Maltese and Giuseppe Rizza for the supervision of works; and Enrico Baldelli and Torsten Johnsson for the electrical systems, the former acting as as design engineer.

48. The bidding firms were Luigi Varnero, Costano Tolli, Mazzetti & Tringali, Fratelli Plazzi, Impresit, Navigatana S.A., Skanska, Speranza Chiaretta, Ind. Eng. Enterprise, Philip Holzman and Myriallis A.P.

49. The construction works were carried out by Varnero with the collaboration of Nevio del Missier, Otello del Frate, Mario Moi, Carlo Amendola, and Domenico Amara.

50. The biographic information on Luigi Varnero has been kindly provided by his grandson Adolfo.

51. Please refer to the Note on Ethiopian Names and Titles at page 426.

52. Angelo Del Boca, *The Negus: The Life and Death of the Last King of Kings* (Arada Books, 2015).

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54. Rebecca Martin Nagy, *Continuity and Change: Three Generations of Ethiopian Artists* (Samuel P. Harn Museum of Art, University of Florida, 2007).

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56. The article written by Arturo Mezzèdimi is presented in Chapter 2 at page 196. Arturo Mezzèdimi, “How the Work Was Conceived” *Africa Hall, Addis Ababa* (Addis Ababa: The Ministry of Information of the Imperial Ethiopian Government / Il Poligrafico, Asmara, 1962): 16–42.

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58. Role equivalent to the Chief of Palace.

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61. Sigfried Giedion, *Space, Time, and Architecture*, 7th ed. (Geoffrey Cumberlege, 1947): 421.

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64. Dudley, *A Workshop for Peace: Designing the United Nations Headquarters*: 32.

65. Christopher E.M. Pearson, *Designing UNESCO: Art, Architecture and International Politics at Mid-Century* (Ashgate, 2010): 116.

66. Françoise Choay, *Unesco Headquarters in Paris* (Tiranti. Ix, 1958).

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69. “El Edificio de las Naciones Unidas en Santiago de Chile,” United Nations pamphlet. ECLA/30-55-9 (1966).

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72. The British Administration of Eritrea was held between April 1941 and September 1952, when Eritrea was federated into the Empire of Ethiopia. The federation lasted ten years, until the annexation of November 1962. Eritrea gained independent in May 1991.

73. When UNECA was established in April 1958, its members were Belgium, Egypt, Ethiopia, France, Ghana, Italy, Liberia, Libya, Morocco, Portugal, Spain, Sudan, Tunisia, the Union of South Africa, and the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland.

74. Arturo Mezzèdimi, “How the Work Was Conceived”: 16-42. Kindly refer to Endnote 56.

75. *Africa Hall, Addis Ababa*: 7.

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80. Afewerk Tekle was interviewed at the 26th International Congress on Arts and Communications, held from July 11 to 18, 1999 in Lisbon, Portugal.

81. Afewerk Tekle, “The Artists”: 43–44.

82. Afewerk Tekle gave a lengthy description of this process in a lecture at the Library of Congress in 2009. See Afewerk Tekle, “The State of Art in Ethiopia.” I thank Rasselas Lakew for alerting me to this.

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90. For further discussion of these debates and context, see Shiferaw Bekele, “State and Society in Ethiopia (1930’s to 1970’s): Contextualising Gebre Kristos Desta,” in *Gebre Kristos Desta: The Painter-Poet*, ed. Elizabeth W. Giorgis (Institute of Ethiopian Studies, 2006); Heran Sereke-Brhan and Shiferaw Bekele, “Florescence of the Arts in the ‘New Flower’ (Addis Ababa) before 1974,” in *Continuity and Change: Three Generations of Ethiopian Artists*, ed. Rebecca Nagy (Samuel P. Harn Museum of Art, University of Florida, 2007); Kate Cowcher, “A Postcard from Addis: Ethiopian Modernism(s) in the World” in *New Histories of Art in the Global Postwar Era: Multiple Modernisms*, ed. Flavia Frigeri and Kristian Handberg (Routledge, 2021): 151–163.

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92. Jutte, *Transparency: The Material History of an Idea*: 79–80.

93. Afewerk Tekle, “The State of Art in Ethiopia.”

94. “Ethiopians working on a jet engine (E.A.L.)” (1970) is a monochrome ink sketch made in an airplane assembly space. It is reproduced in Richard Pankhurst, *Afewerk Tekle*: 94.

95. The emperor's full title was "Conquering Lion of the Tribe of Judah," and his insignia featured a lion with a crown and a cross, which also appeared on the imperial tricolor.
96. Wondwossen Asnake Kibret (@WondyAK), "Dr #DeborahBix informative briefing on #COVID19. BTW vintage scarf you wore tonight (by most celebrated & acclaimed #Ethiopian artist – Afewerk Tekle from 1986," X [Twitter], April 10, 2020. (Last viewed 10 June 2024).
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98. Please refer to the Note on Ethiopian Names and Titles at page 426.
99. In 2024, Nenne Sanguineti Poggi participates for the first time in La Biennale di Venezia 60th International Art Exhibition.
100. In 1950–60s Asmara, behind the appearance of an understated town, was a cosmopolitan center, large enough to host diverse communities and small enough to make them close.
101. The article written by Nenne Sanguineti Poggi is presented in Chapter 3 at page 268. Nenne Sanguineti Poggi, "The Artists" *Africa Hall, Addis Ababa* (Addis Ababa: The Ministry of Information of the Imperial Ethiopian Government / Il Poligrafico, Asmara, 1962): 45–46.
102. Sanguineti Poggi, *Di che colore dipingersi? Vita a colori di un'artista del Novecento attraverso segni, disegni, dipinti e tavole*: 153.
103. The article written by Brunetto Buracchini is presented in Chapter 3 at page 269. Brunetto Buracchini, "The Artists" *Africa Hall, Addis Ababa* (Addis Ababa: The Ministry of Information of the Imperial Ethiopian Government / Il Poligrafico, Asmara, 1962): 47.
104. Mezzèdimi, "Hailé Selassié I: a Testimony for Reappraisal."
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106. "The green colours on the facade of the Secretariat building blend with the trees in the background, and that at times buildings were built in relation to sky lines." (Jacopo Galli, PhD, personal communication, November 7, 2019).
107. Mezzèdimi, "How the Work Was Conceived": 16–42.
108. Mezzèdimi, "How the Work Was Conceived": 16–42.
109. Antonio Sant'Elia, *Manifesto of Futurist Architecture* (Lacerba, 1914).
110. Emperor Haile Selassie I, "Inaugural Speech of the United Nations Economic Commission for Africa" (Addis Ababa, Ethiopia, 1961).
111. Emperor Haile Selassie I, "Inaugural Speech of the Organisation of African Unity Summit" (Addis Ababa, Ethiopia, 1963).
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113. Mezzèdimi, "How the Work Was Conceived": 16–42.
114. Kindly refer to Endote 4.
115. Quoted in Klaas van Walraven, *Dreams of Power: The Role of the Organization of African Unity in the Politics of Africa 1963–1993* (Africa Studies Centre, 1999): 133.
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