

THE ETHIOPIAN CLOAK

Villa Freischütz currently exhibits a very special object: the Ethiopian cloak. Stately garments trimmed with lion fur like this one were awarded to warriors of merit in imperial Ethiopia (Abyssinia). We don't know for sure how the cloak got here but in all likelihood General Enea Navarini brought the garment to Villa Freischütz when he returned home to Merano from the Italo-Abyssinian War.

This exhibition is about war, conquest and exploitation. At a closer look the cloak tells the story of an African power symbol acquired by European colonists. Thus, the museum insistently asks what to do with colonial objects. How shall we act knowing what we do today about occupying forces taking possession of items like this one? We try to find an answer by combining scientific and aesthetic imagination asking our visitors what they think. Should we return the cloak to Ethiopia? Thinking about our narratives and our inheritance, about remembrance and our responsibility, we want to find out whose history and whose memories matter.

We dedicate this exhibition to the memory of Angelo Del Boca, the Italian contemporary historian who died in July 2021. His work about Italian fascist colonialism changed our conception of history – and met with considerable opposition – directing our attention and empathy to the “other”, thereby changing our perception of “self”.



Photo: Georg Tappeiner

A war 80 years ago

On 3rd October 1935, the first dictatorship in modern Europe – fascist Italy – waged a brutal war of conquest in East Africa which led, with devastating bloodshed, to the short-lived Italian rule in Ethiopia that lasted until 1941. Benito Mussolini's war of aggression started in a pincer movement from the Italian colony Eritrea in the north and Italian Somaliland in the south. Without a warning or a prior declaration of war – let alone a cause – some hundred thousand Italian soldiers attacked the Ethiopian-Abyssinian divisions under the command of Emperor Haile Selassie I. Among the heavily armed and well-organised Italian forces were hundreds of men from South Tyrol who had been conscripted into military service.

Rodolfo Graziani was commander-in-chief of the troops invading the south, his subordinate was Enea Navarini. On 5th May 1936, the Italian army with its highly superior air force and toxic chemical weapons entered the Ethiopian capital Addis Ababa. On 9th May, Mussolini declared the war, an aggressive violation of international humanitarian law, over. He annexed the Ethiopian

empire, declared it part of the new colony Italian East Africa and proclaimed a new Roman Mediterranean empire. On the same day, Victor Emmanuel III, the king of Italy, appointed himself Abyssinian emperor. Yet on 27th November 1941, after the victory of the allied British-American and Abyssinian forces, the Ethiopian monarchy was restored and the Italian interlude in Ethiopia came to an end.

Today, the war in East Africa is considered the first example of modern war atrocities and an early test field for systematic destruction and genocidal warfare preceding the horrors of World War II. An estimated half a million inhabitants or more fell victim to the war and the oppression. From 1936 to 1941 an apartheid regime reigned in Ethiopia that granted all privileges to the European "master race" and reduced the native population to submission and passivity. Even though the League of Nations was quick to condemn the war – albeit sanctions were lifted in the summer of 1936 – Italy was free to exploit the country until its defeat during the East African campaign in 1941. When Nazi fascism ended in 1945, war crimes were neither prosecuted, nor was there a recompense for the survivors of the Italian military rule.

The General

One of the commanders of the Italian forces occupying Ethiopia was General Enea Navarini. Born in Cesena in 1885, Navarini decided on a military career early on and served as a soldier in the First Italian-Libyan War and the First World War. In 1925, he married Luisa Fromm y Hilliger. Her fa-

ther, the art collector Franz Fromm, had bought Villa Freischütz in 1921. Enea's and Luisa's daughter Rosamaria Navarini established in her testament in 2013 the Navarini-Ugarte foundation behind the Villa Freischütz museum.

Enea Navarini was head of the military school in Rome from 1932 to 1935. He was appointed brigadier, i.e. the commander of a unit's smallest group, in 1936. The same year he was sent to Italian Somalia. His troops invaded South Ethiopia in October. In the lake district of the Abyssinian highlands around Irba Moda, Chevenna and Shashamane (formerly the province Shewa and today the regional state Oromia) Navarini led military actions against the Ethiopian resistance. Mainly, his troops tried to capture Ras Desta Damtew, an army commander, leader of the African resistance and Emperor Haile Selassie's son-in-law. After long-lasting persecutions and numerous battles, Ras Desta Damtew was finally arrested on 24th February 1937, tried by court-martial and sentenced to death by hanging. His body was displayed openly for a whole day as a public warning.

Afterwards, Navarini was billeted to Wolaita Sodo in support of the Italian colonies. Apart from pacifying the region, by ceaselessly exerting military power, he was mainly responsible for the infrastructure, i.e. constructing roads. In April 1938, he was transferred to Jimma, the capital of the former province Kaffa southwest of Addis Ababa where he was promoted to the title of divisional commander in September 1938. In November 1938, he left Ethiopia and returned to Merano. Enea Navarini lived in Villa Freischütz until he died in 1977.

In charge of the project:
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Please tell us what you think about the exhibition and the questions it raises:
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