



## BOOK REVIEW

### *Des empires en carton: Les expositions coloniales au Portugal et en Italie (1918-1940),*

by Nadia Vargaftig,  
by Remington L. Stuck

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VARGAFTIG, Nadia

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In the time since the late twentieth-century, between turns toward to the subaltern and the advent of the post-colonial, it seems that critical reconsiderations of the “colonial question” have become paramount in rethinking scholarship of European history—and indeed, as Nadia Vargaftig makes clear, in the arena of Art History, as well. In her first scholarly monograph, derived from her doctoral dissertation in the Department of Contemporary History at l’Université Paris-Diderot, Vargaftig offers a meticulously researched and masterfully written investigation of the complex entanglements of colonialism and visual politics in the European landscape during the interwar period. Ambitious in its scope and elegant in its execution, Vargaftig’s *Des empires en carton* (“Cardboard Empires”) explores the practices and politics behind colonial exhibitions—in their many forms and under the many titles that they take shape in the various languages in and among which Vargaftig works, as she notes—in Italy and Portugal between the years 1918 and 1940 (12). Written in Vargaftig’s native French, drawing upon primary documents and critical sources in Portuguese, Italian, and English, and published finally in Spain by the *Biblioteca de la Casa de Velázquez*, her project is no minor feat, and indeed participates in a dynamic international and cross-cultural discourse in the current fields of art history and exhibition studies.

Vargaftig assumes the wake of World War I as her point of departure—a period during which both Italy and Portugal, having emerged on the side of the victors, were eager to expand their colonial prospects, namely looking to the African continent for further territorial conquest (2). As she notes, however, “the international balance of forces in Europe swiftly condemned these plans to the realm of illusion”<sup>1</sup> (327). In a series of disappointments and unrealized conquests, both nations experienced political frustrations that soon grew to be the catalyzing forces for the rise of totalitarian and hyper-conservative ideologies, and the eventual installation of Benito Mussolini’s fascist regime and Antonio de Oliveira Salazar’s *Estado Novo* in Italy and Portugal, respectively. Within this historical framework, Vargaftig’s aim is to articulate and understand the ways in which notions of “empire” and “the colonial” were constructed and visualized in these two

1 This phrase is the English translation of Vargaftig’s original phrase, and appears in the English-language version of the abstract to the book, translated by Alastair Ross (pg. 327). For the original French, see p. 323.

totalitarian states vis-à-vis the curating of fairs, displays, *mostras*, *feiras*, and *esposizione* as well as through the nation's appearances in different international exhibitions during this time. She attempts to decode the mechanisms of the propaganda machines established within these two visual regimes, questioning the ways in which national identities, canonical histories, and iconographic models were reappropriated, reinvented, and (re)circulated in the face of the failed expansions and authoritarian coups.

Her argument situates her reader within this historical context, which, though rich and complex, is distilled succinctly and eloquently for those whose prior knowledge on the subjects of Portuguese and Italian colonialism may not be so exhaustive. Vargaftig is careful to call into question the character of what makes a "colonial exhibition," ultimately ruling that the term is a fluid and highly dynamic one to be employed always with a hint of discretion, and that there is, in fact, no singular, determining criterion that might define an exhibition as "colonial" or not (Vargaftig herself chooses a selection of 54 "colonial exhibitions" as case studies for her investigation) (28). Likewise, she is cognizant of the semantic politics of the terms such as *exhibition*, *exposition/exposizione/exposição*, *foire*, *mostra*, and others used in the official titles of the cases that she examines, understanding them not as distinct categories, but as a common, though fluid, typology and practice known by many different names across the languages<sup>2</sup> (20). According to her formulations, it is possible to articulate, more or less, three primary types of "colonial exhibitions" among the dozens of cases considered here: 1.) colonial exhibitions realized in the homeland European cities 2.) industrial fairs, commercial exhibitions, and other displays held in the colonial provinces, and 3.) the sponsorship of national pavilions and other displays sponsored outside of the country at international exhibitions and on a global scale, many of which featured "colonial sections" to showcase each country's overseas holdings (20). The book moves not only chronologically, but also through thematic lines and particular exhibitions as well as political episodes, placing an emphasis more so upon the political currents and actual visual mechanisms in question rather than adopting a strict linear progression as is often so rigidly enforced in such historical works. Her first chapter, *Crises et Renouvellements* ("Crises and renewals") concerns itself with the *bouleversements de la guerre* ("upsets of the war") and the greater frustrations suffered by Italy and Portugal following World War I and their subsequent turn toward an expansionist spirit, resulting in the creation of a variety of propagandistic entities and colonialist organizations on the national level (36). Chapter II shifts its focus to the participation of the two nations at major international exhibitions, including the Ibero-American Exposition

2 Vargaftig writes, "Les expositions coloniales ne se résument pas à la narration ou à la mise en scène d'une doctrine officielle en matière de colonisation." These exhibitions are thus, by nature, dynamic and often polymorphous, and her study serves to tease out their methodological and conceptual similarities during this period.

in Seville (1929), the Colonial Exposition of Antwerp (1930), International Colonial Exhibition in Paris (1931), highlighting the ways in which these operations largely functioned as potent “laboratories” for both colonial propaganda and political ideologies (95). Her third chapter, “The colonies according to themselves” (*Les Colonies Par Elles-Mêmes*) opens up many of the less-studied colonial industrial and agricultural fairs from the Italian and Portuguese territories in order to decode the ways in which hierarchies of imperial power and order were necessarily inscribed within the social fabric of the colonized societies and put on display by way of these fairs.

Chapter VIII is a special chapter dedicated to those whom she deems the “forgotten actors” of the colonial exhibitions—individuals from the colonized territories who figured into the displays erected on homeland soil. In an attempt to reinvigorate the figures of these “forgotten actors” who were too often “utilized or even brutalized,” Vargaftig claims to abandon “*l’approche monographique*” and dedicates the final chapter of the book to an understanding of the presence of these individuals at these events, and the polemical, exploitative politics of recruitment and display that more often than not belied the outward performance that the exhibition-goers experienced from their spectator’s standpoint (239). Notably, she highlights the case of one display that unfolded in the *secção colonial* of the *Exposição Histórica do Mundo Português* (Historical Exhibition of the Portuguese World) in 1940, entitled “*Cerimónia do casamentos de negros*” (The Marriage of Two Blacks”), in which a marriage celebration for a Guinean man and an Angolan woman was celebrated at the chapel on the ground of the colonial section (243). The two, who had resided in Portugal for 18 and 28 years, respectively, were presented as “civilized” citizens *du métropole* who held jobs and lived respectable lives. According to Vargaftig, the ceremony was, no doubt, an attempt on the part of the Portuguese organizers (and their active imaginations) to present a certain “colonial ideal” that there could exist such a harmony between individuals of two different colonies, implying a sense of unity—under the flag of Portugal and the *Estado Novo* (243). Moreover, this becomes a demonstration of the fact that the organizers feared little in subjecting so many aspects of the colonial actors’ lives to public scrutiny: in this case, the “*domaine de l’intime*” and the familial sphere. Such is also the case in the section entitled “*naître et mourir à l’exposition*” (“Living and Dying at the Exhibition”), in which the author recounts the cases of tragedy and loss in the midst of the spectacle. Among them, in the Portuguese case, the instance of a Mozambican woman who gives birth to twins who do not survive the labor process, and the striking case of the Guinean Chief Braime Sanhá, whose newborn child perished on the fairgrounds only hours later his wife who also succumbed during the birth<sup>3</sup> (258).

3 Vargaftig notes that these cases at the EHMP were documented in letters and reports by representatives of the governments of the respective nations and, in these and other cases of such tragedy, were reported to the administration of the minister of colonies in Portugal (258).

These “forgotten actors” were subjected to climatic shock, the risk of diseases such as tuberculosis and pneumonia, the irreverent and often ridiculing gaze of the European spectator, and more, and thus became, willingly or not, actors in what Vargaftig has called “the dramaturgy of the colonial encounter” (*la dramaturgie du rencontre colonial*) and the politics of display, and deserve to have their own narratives reconsidered in this complex historiography (268).

It might only be said that Vargaftig’s immensely rich work could benefit from a larger reservoir of images and visual resources. However, the author herself addresses the difficulties of such a prospect in the introduction to her methodologies, wherein she recounts the various obstacles she encountered, such as having been denied access to some of the archives of the exhibitions in question, including the SGL (*Sociedade de Geografia de Lisboa*) in Portugal and the MTTO (*Mostra triennale delle terre italiane d’oltremare*) in Italy (22). Moreover, the question of politics provides a further obstacle. To study the production of visual material under two totalitarian regimes in which ideologies were stern and censorship was rigid, creates an additional layer of challenge in mining sources, as Vargaftig explains that a number of the archives that she did successfully consult were often fragmented or less than well-tended, impeding her valiant efforts to reconstruct complete (or “as complete as possible”) portraits of the array of greatly heterogeneous events in question. Nonetheless, the great result of this difficulty in navigating her “labyrinth of sources” is that the author is all the more attentive to even the most modest of documents and most minute of details, mining them for their maximal historical potential. If Vargaftig’s aims are indeed to enrich the expanding knowledge of Portuguese and Italian colonial histories and to continue to broaden the horizons of the field of exhibition studies, *Des empires en carton* is an elegant and incredibly rich point of departure for doing so.

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