

# Ardengo Soffici's *The Room of the Mannequins*: Primitivism, Classicism and French Modernism

## *La sala de los Maniqués de Ardengo Soffici: Primitivismo, clasismo y modernismo francés*

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### ABSTRACT

Ardengo Soffici's engagement with African art was mediated by French modernism and led him to articulate a painterly aesthetic at once 'primitive' and classical. Soffici moved to Paris in 1900, and after his return to Florence in 1907 devoted himself to updating Italian art by promoting French modernism. Specifically, the artist created a modern style that incorporated these advances as well as elements from the early Italian Renaissance. This paper analyzes his fresco cycle, *The Room of the Mannequins* (1914), which demonstrates his temporary adoption of the Parisian scene's primitivism while recalling the decoration of ancient Roman and Renaissance villas.

While Pablo Picasso's *Les Femmes d'Alger* (1907) shattered academic conventions by relying on primitive art's 'savage' nature, in

Soffici's murals, the female figures are playful and non-threatening, bringing to mind the pastoral landscapes that informed both Henri Rousseau and Henri Matisse's works. Though the Italian artist substituted African references in his later work with allusions to Tuscan folk paintings, his brief use of the former demonstrates the ways in which non-Western references interacted with Italian art even in the absence of direct colonial links to their places of origin. Finally, this consideration of Soffici's frescoes and writings on primitivism serves as a pre-history of the ways in which art and visual culture under Fascism appropriated African sources to legitimize its colonial project by presenting them as inferior to classical culture.

**Keywords:** Ardengo Soffici, Primitivism, Modernism, Cubism, Colonialism, Pastoral Landscape.

### RESUMEN

Ardengo Soffici y su apropiación del arte africano fue mediado por el modernismo francés, y eventualmente articuló una estética pictórica tanto clásica como 'primitiva.' Soffici vivió en París de 1900 a 1907, y al volver a Florencia, se dedicó a renovar el arte italiano y promover el modernismo francés. En específico, el artista creó un estilo moderno que incorporara estos avances además de elementos del Renacimiento italiano. Este ensayo analiza sus murales, *The Room of the Mannequins* (La Sala de los Maniqués, 1914), los cuales demuestran su adopción temporal del primitivismo parisino al mismo tiempo que recuerda las decoraciones pictóricas de las antiguas villas romanas y renacentistas.

Mientras que en *Les Femmes d'Alger* (1907) Pablo Picasso rompió con el academicismo apoyándose al apoyarse en las cualidades 'salvajes' del arte primitivo, en las obras de Soffici, las figuras femeninas son lúdicas

e inofensivas y se remiten a los paisajes pastorales que influenciaron tanto a Henri Rousseau como a Henri Matisse. Mientras que el artista italiano sustituyó las referencias africanas en su trabajo con alusiones a la pintura popular en Toscana, su breve uso del exotismo demuestra la manera en que referencias no-Occidentales interactuaron con el arte italiano a pesar de no contar con vínculos coloniales directos a su lugar de origen. Esta consideración de los murales y escritos de Soffici en torno al primitivismo funciona como una pre-historia de la apropiación fascista de fuentes africanas para legitimar su proyecto colonial, pues en general eran presentadas como inferiores al clasicismo.

**Palabras clave:** Modernidad. Comunidad. Festividad Tradicional.

Given Ardengo Soffici's key role in the development of Italian art, it is necessary to scrutinize his engagement with exotic primitivism. This was part of his broader primitivism, namely an interest in sources then outside of the canon, such as folk art, the early Florentine Renaissance, Paul Cézanne, and Henri Rousseau. While rooted in his country's artistic heritage, his interest in these sources was influenced by figures such as Guillaume Apollinaire and Pablo Picasso, reflecting his insider knowledge of advanced Parisian culture (Pinkus, 1995, pp. 22-81). As such, Soffici's primitivism was a complex blend of modernity and tradition that developed in a unique manner; while many European artists that turned to exotic primitivism did so in order to abandon the conventions upheld by academic art and its reliance on classicism, Soffici blurred this antagonism in several frescoes, only to restore it after World War I (Connelly, 1995).

The fresco cycle *The Room of the Mannequins* (1914), which he painted to decorate the philosopher Giovanni Papini's country house in Bulciano, Tuscany, includes figures reminiscent of Picasso's African women and inserted itself within the

classical practice of decorating villa interiors with pastoral landscapes (Spencer, 2010). These paintings reveal that representations of Africans in Italian art before and during the war were initially mediated by French modernism and colonialism. For instance, the paintings include a number of formal references to Cubism and collage, and the dark-skinned figures recall Picasso and André Derain's primitivist women. When analyzed alongside Soffici's contemporaneous writings about African art and Cubism, the frescoes bring to focus Italian artists' complicated response to French modernism. For instance, despite the fact that Italy had few colonial holdings at the time, its artists adapted France's appropriation of non-Western sources according to their own concerns.

Soffici's visual and written primitivism points to important intersections and divergences between French and Italian modernism that have heretofore not been examined in depth. Though his early writings on African sculpture centered on its importance for Cubism, his nationalist turn led him to abandon this positive appraisal of non-Western art in favor of employing Italian folk art instead. Yet *The Room of the Mannequins* belies Soffici's rejection of non-European primitivism in his art criticism, and displays further peculiarities present in the Italian approach to non-Western art. Since they were painted during World War I, these primitivist frescoes allowed Soffici to pose the superiority of Mediterranean culture over that of Germany, as will be seen below.

Finally, my analysis of *The Room of the Mannequins* points towards the need to examine primitivism in Italy after the end of the armed conflict. Though in 1914 they referenced Soffici's debt to French art rather than Italian colonialism in Africa, during the late thirties, black bodies and faces appeared in numerous publications, murals and mosaics commissioned by the regime. They were used to highlight the purity of the classical body, and by extension, the superiority of Italian civilization and race, and were often tied to the regime's colonial discourse. Due to this, Soffici's primitivist works and writings must not only be read within the context of the artist's defense of Mediterranean

culture during World War I, but also in light of his eventual support of fascist colonialism during the late 1930s.

### **Italian primitivism and the history of modern art**

The rise and subsequent erasure or suppression of exotic primitivism in Italy has yet to be adequately addressed. Specifically, the ways in which non-Western sources were processed in Italy have to be described on their own terms rather than according to French and/or German art and their respective colonial projects. Though Ezio Bassani's essay in the Museum of Modern Art's (MoMA) catalog for the 1984 exhibition "Primitivism" in Modern Art: Affinity of the Tribal and Modern, traced Umberto Boccioni and Carlo Carrà's exposure to both African art and French primitivism, it unfortunately erased Soffici's key role in this phenomenon. The fact that he also denied that primitivism did exist during Fascism is also problematic, and has unfortunately precluded a more sustained engagement with Italian developments related to this. More recent studies have dealt with this, such as Alessandro Del Puppo's essays on Amedeo Modigliani, which are insightful contributions to the field, but mostly focus on the Parisian context his career developed in. Emily Braun's work on Mario Sironi's expressionism does not dwell on his exotic primitivism, which was mediated by German Expressionism. Other accounts have focused on primitivism in terms of naïveté and the influence of the Italian primitive painters or have only considered the first two decades of the twentieth century (Borgogelli, Bonzano, Cavallini, Nardoni, 2015 & Messina, 1994).

Rather than restricting the existence of non-Western primitivism in Italy to the years leading up to and including World War I, as several of these studies do, I argue in favor of analyzing this phenomenon and the discourse that emerged against it before and during Fascism. Tellingly, the artists that rejected the exotic sought out similar primordial qualities in native sources such as folk art, the Italian primitives, Etruscan and Romanesque art while retaining formal elements and qualities associated with non-

Western objects. Thus, focusing on Soffici's primitivism is a way to reconsider its reception and development in Italy as well as the ways in which it drew upon and diverged from its development in France.

Beyond arguing for the need to reconstruct and analyze the development of primitivism in Italy by focusing on Soffici, it is necessary to insert this country within recent debates regarding modernist primitivism. Until the mid-1980s, the art historical discourse on this strand had mostly refused engage with Western imperialism and the racist assumptions that sustained it; additionally, most studies written about this topic have centered on the primitivism that arose in countries with substantial colonial holdings. For instance, Robert Goldwater analyzed this phenomenon as early as 1938, but he neither tied it to colonialism nor considered it beyond a formal approach. Moreover, he predominantly relied on French and German examples (Goldwater, 1967). In many ways, his reading of non-Western art's effect on modernism cast it as a passive source, as part of "*an internal dialectic of liberation from narrative content towards an emphasis on material form*" (Myers, 1922, p. 271).

Goldwater's focus on formal similarities or correspondences between non-Western and modern art has since been questioned, most notably in the harsh critical reception of the MoMA's aforementioned exhibition (Flam and Deutsch, 2003).<sup>1</sup> A number of prominent art historians and anthropologists reproached the museum for displaying art from Africa and Oceania in order to highlight modernism's formal innovations without analyzing the colonial context that made these sources available, their intended function, or the rise of modernist projects outside of Europe. As in Goldwater's reading, the exhibition's curator, William Rubin, admitted no real influence, claiming that modern art's path towards formal experimentation was merely confirmed by non-Western sources, and emphasizing instead an ahistorical relationship between 'tribal' and modern art.

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<sup>1</sup> For an anthology that includes the most important responses to the Museum of Modern Art's exhibition on primitivism, see Jack Flam and Miriam Deutsch, (2003).

In order to revise Italy's role within Europe's appropriation of African art, my essay considers Soffici's reconfiguration of French primitivism and traces how he used African references in his frescoes and art criticism. Rather than focusing only on formal or stylistic elements, it seeks to demonstrate that his depiction of African women, despite being mediated by French art, responded to Italian artistic and political concerns. His representation of these figures as timeless and passive also fits within the European racial discourse that justified colonialism, an example of how artists whose countries were not colonial powers felt entitled to employ these sources according to their needs. In general, this artist diverges from an art historical narrative largely shaped by French art and imperialism, which suggests that a comparative approach to European primitivism presents a fuller picture of the variety of ways in which African art was received and reconfigured in this continent.

### **Soffici's art criticism, Cubism, and primitivism**

Soffici's writings about primitivism were more accessible than his frescoes at Bulciano, since they appeared in the influential Florentine magazines *La Voce* (1908-1916) and *Lacerba* (1913-1915), the latter of which he directed alongside Papini. These articles were part of his campaign to update Italian art after having spent seven years in Paris (1900-1907). While in France, Soffici was part of Picasso and Apollinaire's circle; though he is now largely forgotten outside of Italy due to his allegiance to Fascism, he promoted Impressionism, Post-Impressionism, Cézanne, Rousseau, Arthur Rimbaud, and Cubism in Italy before World War I through his paintings, the exhibits he organized, and his art criticism, which often attacked Italy's artistic institutions and their outdated taste. Soffici's role in Italy was akin to that of Alfred Stieglitz or Roger Fry in their respective countries, since each of them promoted European modernism and engaged with its primitivism during the first two decades of the twentieth century.

Soffici was in Paris when French artists “discovered” African sources at the Trocadéro and other venues, and he began to write about this in 1911. His interest in African sculpture and its effects on modern painting was predicated upon his early appreciation of Cubism, and he was one of the first European intellectuals to evaluate this movement’s primitivism positively. However, his nationalism and belief in the supremacy of Italian culture increased in 1913, and he began to look at local sources, namely, Tuscan folk paintings and painted signs as an alternative. Thus, his return to African references in 1914 in the Bulciano frescoes marks his one of his last moments of cosmopolitanism and constitutes an important episode in the reception of Cubism and its primitivist tendencies outside of France.

Even before his harsh denouncement exotic primitivism in his writings in 1914, Soffici valued it insofar as it could be inserted into a reading that privileged his country’s art. In the essay “Picasso e Braque,” published in *La Voce* in 1911 and perhaps one of the first accounts of Cubism to be published in Italy, Soffici praised this movement’s reliance on African sculpture while replicating stereotypes regarding its creators. At the same time, this account of Cubism considers African art’s importance for the French movement, and more importantly, describes it as an acceptable catalyst for the renewal of European painting. This indirect, or oblique primitivism depended on Cubism and its sources, but was ultimately tied to Soffici’s attempt to restore Italian art’s greatness by looking towards France.

According to this article, Picasso had turned to African sculpture in his path towards Cubism and against Impressionism, an approach which Soffici did not yet see as a threat to his country’s artistic heritage. Rather, he noted that Cubism was able to incorporate Western and non-Western sources in order to return to Italian art’s plasticity. The following passage gives African sculpture a central role in this shift:

Moreover, the decisive step, which would lead our artist [Picasso] to a much more advanced field of experiences, was not taken until two years



later, that is, when after distancing himself progressively 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 antique Egyptians, and of the Africans—and perhaps even more natively synthetic—of the savage peoples of southern Africa. [...] Picasso instead [...] (unlike Gauguin)—even perhaps due to his somewhat Moorish origin—after he understood and loved that naïve and great art, simple and expressive, coarse and refined at once, immediately knew how to appropriate its essential virtues, and because these consisted in realistically interpreting nature by deforming its aspects according to a hidden lyrical need in order to intensify its suggestive qualities, applied himself from then on to translate, in his works, the real, by transforming and deforming it, not as his masters had done, but—as each showed him with a particular example—by following his modern soul's own ways. (Soffici, 1911b).<sup>2</sup>

While referring to their creators as “popoli selvaggi,” Soffici linked the sculptures to Picasso's rediscovery of plasticity, a category which he claimed defined Italian art as well as making it superior to that of other nations' (Soffici, 1911a). He also described African art as primitive and sincere, adjectives he had also applied to Cézanne, Rousseau and the Italian primitives, thus alluding to an expanded primitivism that

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<sup>2</sup> The original text reads: “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 poiché 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.”

incorporated both Western and non-Western sources (Soffici, 1911b). In a sense, while many French artists sought primitive art in order to reject academicism, Soffici inserted it within a reading that valued Cubism's plastic values and linked this to the Italian Renaissance.

Soffici's attitudes regarding African sculpture certainly reveal a Eurocentric bias, but it is important to note that at the time most Italian critics, art historians and anthropologists, would have refused to consider such works as art or as source for Europeans. Indeed, Soffici's reading of this art was more or less in line with those of Apollinaire, Daniel-Henry Kahnweiler and Carl Einstein, who either noted its status as art or its key role for the development of Cubism.<sup>3</sup> One important difference between them and Soffici, however, is that the artist claimed that the sculptures had aided the cubist painters to reinstate the Renaissance's plasticity. This dialogue between Italian nationalism and primitivism is also present in the frescoes and will be discussed below. Before painting these works, however, the artist reconsidered not only the pertinence of African sculpture for the development of Italian art, but also that of Cubism, a choice consistent with the continental *rappel à l'ordre* during and after World War I and the concurrent rise of Fascism.

Soffici's position on African art shifted in response to his views on Cubism and his temporary alliance with Futurism. This occurred in his magazine *Lacerba* from 1913 onwards, and he adopted an increasingly nationalistic perspective that was motivated by his strategic adherence to Marinetti's movement.<sup>4</sup> In "Cubismo e oltre (abecedario)," for

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<sup>3</sup> The most representative texts these authors wrote on African art are the following: Guillaume Apollinaire, *Sculptures Nègres. 24 photographes précédées d'un avertissement de Guillaume Apollinaire et d'un exposé de Paul Guillaume*, Paris 1917, which was based on "Mélancolie ou mélanomanie", in: *Le Mercure de France*, 1 April 1917; Daniel-Henry Kahnweiler, "L'arte nègre et le cubisme", in: *Présence Africaine*, 2 March-April 1948, pp. 367-77; and Carl Einstein, *Negerplastik*, Leipzig 1915. For recent interpretations on Einstein, see Zeidler, *Form as Revolt: Carl Einstein and the Ground of Modern Art*, Ithaca 2016; *Carl Einstein und die europäische Avantgarde*, ed. by Nicola Creighton and Andreas Kramer, Berlin 2012; and Conor Joyce, *Carl Einstein in Documents: and his Collaboration with Georges Bataille*, Philadelphia 2002. Needless to say, the scholarship on Einstein has grown in recent years and it is impossible to list all of them.

<sup>4</sup> For a discussion of Soffici's reconsideration of Cubism in *Lacerba*, see Del Puppo (2000).

example, he minimized the importance of African art; rather than praising primitivism's role in Picasso's recovery of plasticity, he stressed that the Italian Renaissance had anticipated it (Soffici, 1913).<sup>5</sup> Additionally, he claimed that the Futurists were in fact developing ways to expand Cubism in order to lead it to its logical conclusion, further demonstrating that his shift towards Futurism movement modified his attitude regarding the French art and its primitivism (Soffici, 1913). As such, rather than measuring his primitivism against that of French artists, it is important to consider that his writings about it mediated between his waning appreciating for Parisian art and his belief that Futurism could lead Italian art to return to its lost greatness.

While Soffici's articles for *Lacerba* reassessed and relativized the importance of African sources for Cubism, his later articulated a clearer rejection of them. His anthology *Cubismo e futurismo* (1914) included a short piece entitled "L'antiarcaismo futurista," which might have been written upon Carrà's suggestion, who was then still a member of Futurism (Soffici, 1913 & Del Puppo, 2000 p. 214). Here, *arcaismo* refers to artists' reliance on African art or on art from the past, both of which he dismissed as excessive intellectualism, proposing instead the primitivism of the early Italian Renaissance (Soffici, 1914b, p. 77).<sup>6</sup> In this article, Soffici rejected African art as well as ancient Egyptian art, referring to the preference for them as excessive "*refinement, intellectualism, literariness, smug snobbery, decadent mysticism*" (Soffici, 1914b, p. 77) By rejecting African sources as archaic and using terms that could likewise be applied to

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<sup>5</sup> The original text reads: "Chi desiderasse nomi celebri di precursori del cubismo, anche senza risalire ai nostri primitivi, ai bizantini, agli egiziani, agli africani, si protrebbero citare quelli di Masaccio, del Greco, di Rembrandt, di Tintoretto Di tutti quei pittori che nelle loro opere hanno cercato di esprimere—anzichè l'incanto della luminosità iridata, delle linee soavi e diligenti, dell'elegante vaporosità—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. Il che hanno capito alcuni critici francesi i quali accusano i cubisti di esotismo)."

<sup>6</sup> For instance, Soffici returned to the primitivism of French symbolist artists, which was untainted by African art's *arcaismo*: "[...] non si esce dalla ripetizione e in fondo dall'intellettualismo, ispirandosi ai primitivi dell'Egitto o del Congo di quel che non si faccia ispirandosi, come facevan Puvis de Chavannes de Maurice Denis ai nostri pittori del tre e del quattrocento."

symbolist art, Soffici sided with Futurism's scorn for the past and aided this movement to distance itself from Cubism and France. This explains the artist's insistence in relegating African art to a timeless era, a trope that had been prevalent in nineteenth-century anthropology and racial discourse and which continued to be employed well into the twentieth century (Fabian, 1893).

### **Soffici's pictorial primitivism, Picasso, Rousseau and Matisse**

Picasso's *Les Femmes d'Alger (O. J. R. M.)* (1907), which Soffici had seen in Paris, was his main source for the exotic primitivism present in the frescoes, especially with respect to the female figures. Besides that, they feature references to cubist collage and to works by Robert Delaunay, Marc Chagall, and Derain, demonstrating his, and by extension, Papini's close ties to the French scene (Russoli, 1975, p. 234).<sup>7</sup> This synthesis confirms that African art's influence on French painting was one of many elements that Italian artists and intellectuals grappled with after the turn of the century as they moved away from Post-Impressionism and Symbolism, leading towards an indirect primitivism. Though it is clear that Carrà, Boccioni and Soffici could have seen firsthand the same African sculptures that artists based in Paris adapted in their works, the Tuscan artist's frescoes at Bulciano are an instance of cultural mediation. For instance, rather than presenting the women from Picasso's *Les Femmes d'Alger* as threatening figures, he minimized this aspect by lessening their mask-like features and by placing them within a playful atmosphere recalling classical pastorals.

Though all the frescoes at Bulciano demonstrate the influence of Picasso, a portion of them is essentially a mirror image of *Les Femmes d'Alger*. An earlier work by Soffici, *I Mendicanti* (1911), painted the same year he reviewed Cubism's and African sculpture's plasticity positively, also recalls Picasso's canvas. In Bulciano, however, other than representing nude women, Soffici borrowed the crouching figure from

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<sup>7</sup> 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 Kirchner, Schmidt-Rotluff, and even Larionov.

*Demoiselles* as well as the left-most one.<sup>8</sup> The dancer in the middle recalls the standing figure on the right side of Picasso's work; her features are not as clearly indebted to African masks, but her skin color signals her racial difference. While *I mendicanti* removed most of the exotic primitivism employed by Picasso by depicting clothed Italian peasants, and in a sense, anticipated his shift towards Tuscan folk art, Soffici's frescoes retain a clear African identity without representing the women as dangerous 'savages.'

Soffici's reliance on Rousseau's *naïve* style and fantastic jungle scenes likewise tempered Picasso's violent representation of African women. This turn towards Rousseau coincided with Soffici's previous art criticism, since he had written about this artist in 1910 and 1911 for *La Voce* by using terms akin to those with which he praised African art (Borgogelli, 2015). At Papini's villa, Rousseau's *naïveté* is evoked throughout *The Room of the Mannequins* and by the medium employed to paint the frescoes; for example, the artist chose materials commonly used by *imbianchini* (house painters or whitewashers) and was aided by Papini's two young daughters, decisions which sought to give the works a sense of informality (Soffici, 2010, p. 8 & 1955, pp. 427-28). At the same time, the medium employed is in keeping with his growing interest in Tuscan folk art and painted signs, which eventually replaced exotic primitivism.

Soffici's depiction of the landscape and the women within it also incorporated a variant of primitivism tied to the pastoral landscape, a tradition harking back to antiquity that had been recently updated by Matisse. Despite his lukewarm opinion on this painter, Soffici's frescoes adopted a classical aesthetic reminiscent of several of his seminal post-Fauve works (cited in Bock, 2014, p. 464).<sup>9</sup> The largest portion of *The Room of the Mannequins* resembles the composition and mood of one of Matisse's most important pastorals, *Joy of Life* (1905-06). While the lines and geometric shapes in the

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<sup>8</sup> The crouching figure also resembles Derain's bathers, which were influenced by Cézanne's late bathers.

<sup>9</sup> Soffici included a landscape by Matisse lent to him by Bernard Berenson at the *Prima mostra italiana dell'impressionismo*, which he organized in 1910. It is likely that the artist saw Matisse's *Dance* in 1910 while in Paris, see letter 92, Paris, 19 February 1910. In this letter Soffici mentions the retrospective of Matisse's work at Bernheim-June gallery in 1910.

fresco evoke Cubism, the subject matter in Bulciano is clearly pastoral given the presence of figures dancing, tending animals, and lounging. The three standing figures on the left likewise bring to mind Matisse's canvas. Soffici's debt to this artist is also evident in the figures' flatness and stance, which recall those in *Dance* (1910); in these works, both artists appear to have taken their human figures from archaic red figure vases, yet another source that was associated with primitivism at the time. While looking at Rousseau had allowed Soffici to avoid the threatening nature of Picasso's *Demoiselles*, his turn to Matisse established *The Room of the Mannequins* as a modern pastoral, enabling it to function as a refuge from the violence of World War I.

### Primitive and pastoral

While pastoral landscapes illustrate peaceful scenes, such representations usually surface at times of chaos and strife (Hunt, 1992, p. 15). In this particular case, Soffici's frescoes depict a harmonious environment *precisely* at the beginning of World War I, when French, and by extension, Mediterranean culture was being endangered by Germany, at least according to the artist (Flam & Deutsch, 2003, pp. 244-48). On a personal level, the war had interrupted his exchange with Apollinaire, one of the few Paris-based intellectuals he continued to value after returning to Italy and with whom he had hoped to create an Italo-French movement after the armed conflict alongside Giorgio de Chirico and Savinio (Baldacci, 1991, p. 302ff & Richter, 2000, p. 258).<sup>10</sup> This joint effort was discussed several months after the frescoes had been painted, which demonstrates that in 1914, Soffici was thinking about a pan-Mediterranean cultural

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<sup>10</sup> Baldacci touches upon this project when he describes Savinio and de Chirico's links with Apollinaire, Soffici and Papini but does not explore this within the context of Soffici's career. See also Giorgio de Chirico (1987). Cavallo discusses the relationship between de Chirico and Soffici but does not explicitly describe their attempt to work with Apollinaire after the war or their competing aesthetics with respect to *Valori Plastici*. See also Chirico (1987, p. 303). The original text reads: "[...] noi infatti dobbiamo essere amici e dobbiamo amarci stimarci ed aiutarci, imperocché siamo pochi, siamo una pleiade piccola, e ciò che facciamo e ciò che faremo è grande. Dopo la guerra noi dovremmo essere più uniti di prima poiché abbiamo i medesimi ideali. [...] Dopo la guerra insieme a lui (Apoll) ed a qualche altro potremo formare un circolo più solido, più forte e più puro di quella specie di riunione ridicola che erano 'Les Soirées de Paris'"

project. Thus, these works revisit the exotic primitivism Soffici had rejected earlier in 1913 and 1914 in order to negate the effects of the war, since he included African women as a way to represent a Mediterranean Arcadia. Though there are no clear references to modern Italy in the paintings, the allusions to Matisse's pastorals established a link to this country's classical heritage.

As in the pastoral tradition, Soffici's frescoes provided a temporary refuge from the reality that threatened to destroy this idyll. In 1955, the artist mentioned in his autobiography the anxiety that Germany and its allies' threat to France had caused him and Papini, noting that after the fresco was completed, they returned to Florence in the fall of 1914 and went on to advocate in favor of Italy's entrance into the war (Russoli, 1975, pp. 428-29). Indeed, the contemplative mood evoked by both the frescoes and by the villa itself was at once an escape from the war and a reminder of the Parisian scene it seemed to threaten.

At around the same time, other intellectuals interested in restoring Italy's lost greatness relied on the opposition between Mediterranean and Nordic Europe in their landscapes related to the war. For example, the futurist leader and poet Marinetti used typography in order to condemn Germanic civilization and promote the expansion of Italy towards the Balkans; his work operated differently than the frescoes from Bulciano, however, since rather than seeking refuge from the chaos of war, he exalted it. Moreover, rather than return to the pastoral, the cultural agitator drew on French modernist poetry's visual experiments in order to represent the war's violence and confusion. Their different approaches to the conflict and to landscapes clearly illustrate that Soffici was working within the pastoral tradition and its resurgence in French modern painting. Additionally, his blend of exotic primitivism and classicism allowed him to depict an updated pastoral that alluded to the Mediterranean cultural project he sought to pursue as well.

Soffici's frescoes at Bulciano depended on racial difference in order to depict a peaceful atmosphere typical of pastorals, thus creating a distance between the viewer, in this case Papini, and the women represented. According to the conventions ruling the pastoral genre since antiquity, the peasants (or 'natives,' in this case) depicted are important insofar as their leisurely life in the country provides an escape for the educated viewer. At Bulciano, all the figures, whether African or not, allow the ideal viewer to fashion himself as a sophisticated observer, especially since several of them are naked (Chave, 1994, pp. 596-611).<sup>11</sup> This nakedness further separates the European viewer/creator from the non-European figures, exalting the difference between self and Other. Thus, while at first sight it appears that Soffici's work has no clear racial bias, the dark-skinned figures at Bulciano are included because they portray uncivilized individuals whose dances were supposed to alleviate the artist and his friend's anxieties by reminding them of Parisian art and their hopes to collaborate with Apollinaire. Moreover, despite the numerous references to French modernity, the cycle simultaneously evokes a timeless atmosphere, which emphasizes the figures' racial difference, since in general, non-European cultures were relegated to an earlier temporal and cultural order than the West. As such, *The Room of the Mannequin's* harmonious atmosphere, while rooted in the classical pastoral, depended on the racist attitudes that upheld French colonialism and that made African sources available to artists such as Soffici.

Though Soffici's frescoes processed recent developments in French painting, namely Cubism and Matisse's works, an important precursor to this racially charged pastoral can be found in Paul Gauguin's paintings, which rejected modern urban life by representing Tahitians within colorful, timeless landscapes. These tropical pastorals were in turn preceded by his idealized representations of religious peasants, usually Breton women and children, and constitute one of modern painting's earliest

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<sup>11</sup> For an analysis of Picasso's *Les Femmes d'Alger (O. J. R. M.)* from a feminist perspective that also considers colonialism, see Anna Chave (1994)



considerations of the “primitive”.<sup>12</sup> Gauguin himself inserted his works within the French classical landscape tradition; much like Cézanne and Matisse, his works set in Brittany and Tahiti revisited the ideal landscapes first developed by Nicolas Poussin and Claude Lorrain. Notably, both Matisse and Gauguin often relied on non-European “natives” rather than peasants, shepherds, or figures from classical mythology or history in order to reinforce the distance between the idylls represented and their intended viewers. This reveals that Soffici’s primitivism was rooted in the tradition of depicting the Other within a landscape that arose during the nineteenth century; at the same time, it harked back to the pastoral landscapes painted in Baroque Italy by French artists, which were in turn indebted to pastorals created during the classical antiquity and the Renaissance.

Despite the fact that Soffici’s pastoral frescoes immediate precursors belonged to the French tradition, it is important to consider that they were equally indebted to his identity as a Tuscan artist intellectual, which he carefully crafted after his return to Italy in 1907 and throughout his career. Tellingly, *The Room of the Mannequins* is not the only example in which Soffici and Papini relied on “simple” folk to represent an ideal landscape or pastoral. For example, several passages in his proto-fascist novel *Lemmonio Boreo* (1911) and in Papini’s autobiographical account *Un Uomo Finito* (1913) relied on Tuscany’s countryside and its peasants as settings and supporting characters for their respective protagonists adventures (Soffici, 1912).<sup>13</sup> While both intellectuals were extremely interested in their region’s countryside and its culture, they did not engage with its peasants or sought to denounce or improve their living conditions. Instead, Soffici idealized the exploitative sharecropping system prevalent in Italy during the nineteenth century, which had survived well into the twentieth century, *mezzadria*. In the frescoes, African figures substituted the Tuscan peasants included in

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<sup>12</sup> One of the first accounts analysis of Gauguin that considers him from a gendered approach is Abigail Solomon-Godeau (1986). More recent scholarship has dealt with other aspects of this, see: Elizabeth C. Childs (2003), Patty O’Brien (2006); Ruud Welten (2015, pp. 1-13); and Ralph Hajj (2002, pp. 167-181).

<sup>13</sup> See also Giovanni Papini, *Un uomo finito*, Florence 1913.

the aforementioned pastoral accounts, and more importantly, functioned similarly, that is, as markers of timelessness and simplicity. Once Soffici returned to his representation of Italian peasants and proposed Tuscan folk art as a source, he abandoned non-Western primitivism and the depiction of Africans.

### **Responses to *The Room of the Mannequins***

Although Soffici's frescoes were painted in an informal, lighthearted manner, written responses to this work reveal the intricate manner in which his primitivism operated as well as their respective authors' attitude towards the African figures. Papini himself was the first to write about these frescoes in a prose poem from 1915 entitled "La sala dei manichini," which the blend of primitive and European sources present in the frescos and retaining certain aspects related to the pastoral at the same time as he objectified them (Papini, 1920).

Soffici's choice to depict dark-skinned figures distanced them from European viewers, while Papini's poem further dehumanized them. For instance, the poet referred to these figures as mannequins, which likely led to the frescoes' title and could be a potential link to de Chirico's works and the widespread rise of humanoids, mannequins and mechanized men in modern art. The metaphysical painter began to depict mannequins in 1914, and eventually, objects such as store mannequins and automatons became common tropes in European art between the wars. This also resonated with Marinetti's novel *Mafarka le futuriste* (1909), whose protagonist was a mechanized African man that jointly embodied Futurism's idealization of irrationality, savagery, and technology (Marinetti, 1909). Finally, the fact that Papini refers to them as figures that are not quite human goes hand in hand with Soffici's racist description of African sculptors as "popoli selvaggi" in 1911 even as he recognized their creations' role in the rise of Cubism.

In his poem, Papini erases any sort of temporal or cultural specificity, further relegating these women to a realm outside of European civilization while establishing these works as a pastoral. Indeed, he mentions Native Americans, Algerian Turks (sic), Noah's rainbow, black women, and graceful natives despite the fact that not all of these figures or elements are present in the *The Room of the Mannequins* (Papini, 1920).<sup>14</sup> Through the writer's description dancing "savages," this prose poem further confirms that the scene is a pastoral playground for European intellectuals, since it begins and ends with references to an "unmoored soul" who might drown in such exotic places but nonetheless seeks them out in order to flee the middle classes' "homicidal respectability" by imitating the "*black doll that lengthens her bestial sadness along the wall, join the dance, until falling, in the resplendent epilepsy of this prismatic banquet*" (p. 109, 112)<sup>15</sup> In this passage, Papini's description of a liberating dance unequivocally characterizes the frescoes as an escape, which reinforces their function as a pastoral scene. Thus, Papini's poem described Soffici's primitivism as a challenge to the Italian bourgeoisie, proposing instead an atmosphere that encourages loss of control through the representation and imitation of African individuals.

Though Papini's prose poem resonates with several aspects of Soffici's adaptation of Picasso's African women in the years leading up to the Great War, later accounts clarify primitivism's place in Italian culture after World War II. Indeed, Soffici's eventual suppression of his non-European sources in his writings regarding *The Room of the Mannequins* should be considered in light of his art criticism before and after Fascism. Though he had considered it as key for Cubism, African art and exotic primitivism are all but ignored in his memoirs and accounts written after 1945; this occurred despite the fact that the artist focused exclusively on his experiences up to and

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<sup>14</sup> The references are as follows: Native Americans and Algerian Turks, p. 109; Noah's rainbow and black women, p. 110; and graceful natives, p. 111.

<sup>15</sup> Papini refers to an "anima disancorata" that might escape the middle classes' "omicida rispettabilità" by imitating the "bambola nera che allunga sul muro la sua bestiale tristezza, balla anche te, fino alla caduta, nell'epilessia rutilante di questo banquetto prismatico."

including World War I given that they were untainted by Fascism and could help rehabilitate his career after the regime's fall.

Soffici's autobiography, published in 1955, mentions the frescoes but does not acknowledge any direct or indirect engagement with non-Western sources or primitivism, referring instead to "sacred representations" as well as Greek and Etruscan vases (Russoli, 1975, pp. 428-429).<sup>16</sup> This selective narrative calls to mind art history's recognition of primitivism as crucial for the formal development of European modernism and its (until recently) concomitant refusal to further explore aspects such as colonialism or even problematize this appropriation. At the same time, this selective erasure suggests the challenges scholars face when exploring elements that are expunged from artists' careers and/or subsequent autobiographies, as in the case of Soffici and Carrà's suppression of their exotic primitivism during and after World War I.

Despite the fact that Soffici omitted his reliance on primitivism in his biographical account of the creation of *The Room of the Mannequins*, a third account *did* recognize its presence within these frescoes. Viola Paskowszki Papini, one the philosopher's daughters that had helped the artist paint the villa's walls, described the frescoes in 1956 as an "alarming dance" in which a "a dark and unhappy Negress" rested near an ox while two men, who resembled lion tamers, observed the females dance like "beasts" (Paskowski, 2002, p. 70, note 1). Tellingly, Paskowszki Papini's allusions to the African figures focus on their skin color and gender, and she likens women to dancing beasts, marking their difference from the peaceful "lion tamers." Unlike her father, she does not see this as a space for freedom, but rather, as a frantic, disorienting scene. Her description incorporated common stereotypes regarding African rituals, which were

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<sup>16</sup> The original text reads: "Coprii [sic] il primo muro delle immagini figurate di uomini, donne, animali, piante, secondo il carattere, le forme, lo stile, il colore della mia più recente pittura; copersi la seconda parete di nudi danzanti, un po' come si vede nelle raffigurazioni sacre e nei vasi greci ed etruschi; copersi la terza di bagnanti, femmine e maschi, in piedi asciugandosi, o sdraiati fra l'erba e i fiori della riva. Nei pannelli che restavano, allato alle finestre, dipinsi nell'uno, una danzatrice sola agitante un velo giallo; nell'altro una giovane donna seduta accanto a un banchetto di fruttaliola: e così tutta la stanza fu a posto."

regarded with fear by European colonizers well into the twentieth century (Einstein, & Cheng, 2009).<sup>17</sup>

While Paskowski Papini emphasizes the African elements within the frescos, Soffici's autobiography, published one year before, removes such acknowledgement, rendering hers even more salient. Moreover, the philosopher's daughter relies on common tropes regarding Africa while chronicling her childhood, and in a sense, reflects mainstream attitudes regarding non-Western populations and colonialism after the end of World War II. These attitudes also fit shed light on the development of primitivism in Italian art, since unlike in France, it did not usually lead to a more nuanced desire to engage with colonized peoples and their art, as in the case of Surrealism, for instance.

### **Primitive and Italian?**

Soffici's abandonment of Cubism seems to have announced the end of Italian primitivism, and correspondingly, has precluded a thorough evaluation of its development. Despite recent denials that Italian primitivism based on exotic sources existed at all, a number of his compatriots continued to rely on African sources and/or modernist primitivism after World War I, both in their writings and works of art (Braun, 2007, pp. 181-205). This fraught reliance on exotic elements is typified by the mainly negative reception of the exhibitions of African sculpture and Modigliani's work at the 1922 Biennale and by this artist's critical fortune in Italy after his death in 1920. The artist's bohemianism and primitive sources were denounced by some critics (including Soffici) during the 1922 Biennale and were further rejected on the occasion of a second monographic exhibition of his works curated by Lionello Venturi for the 1930 edition of the Venetian exhibition (Braun, 2007, pp. 181-205; Jarrassé, & Messina, 2012, pp. 11-18).

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<sup>17</sup> Paszkowski Papini's view of these frescoes contrasts with Einstein's interest in African masks and rituals as part of his consideration of African sculpture. See Einstein and Joyce Cheng, (2009).

The exhibition of African sculptures at the Biennale epitomizes this country's complicated engagement with these sources as well as the exceptional nature of the Italian case. The organizers' background reveals that it was approached from an ethnographic perspective, since Carlo Anti, an archaeologist, and Aldobrandino Mocchi, an anthropologist, selected the pieces. Previous exhibitions of African sculpture and modern art held in France and the United States, for instance, were usually held by artists or gallery owners such as Stieglitz and Paul Guillaume. Additionally, in the Biennale's exhibition's catalog, Anti recognized African sculpture's role in European art but warned that it should not serve as an inspiration for Italian artists, while several of the critics who reviewed the Biennale denied the works' beauty or status as art (Anti, 1922, pp. 41-42).<sup>18</sup> Indeed, Soffici's abandonment of primitivism and the reception of the Biennale have led to a generalized refusal to reconstruct Italy's primitivism and/or anti-primitivism. Nevertheless, this strand's eventual links to fascist colonialism renders the reconsideration of this engagement with non-Western art an urgent task.

The 1922 and 1930 Biennali established a continuing, if tense, engagement with primitivism, and this strand developed well into the late 1930s. Never fully excised from Italian culture, the relationship between African culture and modern art found itself at the center of fascist racial discourse, since magazines such as *Il Perseo* (1930-1939?) and *La difesa della razza* (1938-1943) denounced the deformation present in primitivist works, noting that it threatened Italian culture and racial purity. Despite the fact that several of the artists accused of relying on African art and the deformation, elongation and distortion associated with it had created works for the regime and were dedicated fascists, they were blamed for denigrating the Italian race (Anonymous, 1938).<sup>19</sup> This position was certainly influenced by German initiatives such as the exhibition *Entartete*

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<sup>18</sup> Others did not consider these works as art, for example, Francesco Saponi (1922); and Deccio Buffoni (1922, pp.275-280).

<sup>19</sup> The works criticized in this article were by Giorgio Morandi, Carlo Carrà, Arturo Martini, Marino Marini, Lucio Fontana and Corrado Cagli.

*Kunst* (1937), but it also built upon the discourse on African art that arose during the 1922 Biennale. Furthermore, its racism resonated with Soffici's writings on African culture, fascist colonialism, and the need to recover Rome's imperial greatness that he published during the mid to late 1930s. Thus, whereas in the Bulciano frescoes the artists had combined classical and exotic references in order to defend Mediterranean culture, he did the opposite once Italy launched in its own imperial project.

Soffici's primitivism in the Bulciano frescoes responded to the cultural and political context determined by the outbreak of World War I. Though there are no clear political allusions, *The Room of the Mannequins* evoked a pastoral scene as well as Picasso's *Demoiselles*, creating a Mediterranean front that attempted to discredit German political and cultural hegemony. This anti-German sentiment was rooted in Giorgio Vasari's approach to what he perceived as a decline in art due to the barbarian invasion of Rome, a view Soffici subscribed to after his return to Italy by attacking the symbolist artist Franz Stuck in his review of the 1910 Biennale.<sup>20</sup> During the war, the futurists as well as Soffici wrote articles against Germany and its culture in order to persuade the public to support the entrance of Italy into the armed conflict.<sup>21</sup> Since the dark-skinned figures were indices of the Parisian milieu that both Soffici and Papini valued, they were part of a pastoral meant to counteract a perceived danger coming from Europe itself, not from the African continent. Thus, the possibility that Germany would invade France led the artist to create a primitive pastoral that did not destabilize the classical, but rather, sought to maintain the superiority of Mediterranean Europe.

During the 1920s and 30s, Soffici reinstated the opposition between the classical and the primitive, and eventually supported the fascist empire. Soon after the war ended, the artist repudiated his avant-garde experience in his magazine *Rete Mediterranea* (1920, itself a clear allusion to the Roman empire's *mare nostrum*, a

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<sup>20</sup> For a recent consideration of the classical-barbarian dichotomy in art history, see Eric Michaud (1922). Soffici reviewed the Biennale in four separate articles: see Soffici (1909).

<sup>21</sup> See Soffici (1914a and 1915).

notion that Fascism recovered as part of its colonial project) and in his retrospective exhibition that same year. He also wrote negatively about the African sculptures and Modigliani's works featured in the 1922 Biennale, advising artists to leave exotic sources behind (Soffici, 1922, Cited in Greco, 1922 p. 365).<sup>22</sup>

Though Soffici stopped creating works inflected by exotic primitivism, his writings continued to depend on notions regarding the alleged cultural and racial inferiority of African individuals. In 1937, for example, Soffici sailed to Libya as part of a group of intellectuals that accompanied Mussolini on a tour of this colony. He eagerly chronicled this trip in *La Gazzetta del Popolo* and praised the dictator while characterizing the locals as animals and using an orientalizing language to refer to this country as timeless (cited in Greco, 2010, p365). Whereas his earlier primitivism had opposed German imperialism, his depiction of Libyans as uncivilized peoples contributed to fascist colonialism. Two years later, he made multiple allusions to the Roman Empire in the conservative magazine *Il Frontespizio* (1929-1940) while viciously attacking African culture (Soffici, 1938, pp. 203-209). Thus, while in 1914, Soffici's African women relaxed within a classical pastoral to provide himself and Papini a momentary escape from the war, once Fascism consolidated its empire, his depiction of African individuals went hand in hand with the regime's racial policies, in which they were to be dominated, segregated, and civilized so as to recover ancient Rome's glory. Tellingly, in 1939, Soffici blamed the French Revolution for the demise of European civilization, since by then, Italians no longer needed this country's mediation in order to access exotic sources, as they had succeeded in creating their own, if short lived, African empire in Libya, Eritrea, and Ethiopia (Soffici, 1938, pp. 203-209).

## Conclutions

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<sup>22</sup> Ricostruzione del dibattito critico sulle riviste italiane", in: *Annali. Arte, musica e spettacolo*, XI (2010), p. 365.



In general, art history has not paid attention to the rise and development of primitivism as well as its political implications in countries with few colonial holdings. Unfortunately, its first practitioners within the Italian milieu provoked the apparent erasure and subsequent disinterest in these sources. Soffici was the first to do this, as he recognized and then denied the importance of primitivism for Cubism, an operation that is replicated by the relative lack of research on his and other Italian artists' reliance on African sources. Nevertheless, throughout the *ventennio*, artists and scholars did continue to engage with African sources and/or European primitivism. Others sought out domestic primitivisms as an alternative, which allowed them to retain certain formal characteristics as well as African art's 'sincerity' and coarseness without directly relying on the exotic. Furthermore, Italian modernism's debt to tradition and collaboration with Fascism has severely limited its primitivism's visibility within art history.

Despite these incomplete art historical narratives, the visual and textual evidence of an Italian primitivist turn (in)directly informed by African sources remains. More importantly, it challenges the art historical account that credits European artists with leading towards an acceptance of non-Western artifacts as artistic, not ethnographic objects between the wars. Whereas in France avant-garde artists' appreciation and deployment of these sources led to debates regarding their potential entrance into art museums as early as 1914 and 1920, Italian artists' primitivism did not subscribe to this, at least during Fascism. Besides, while the surrealists organized a counter-exhibition to denounce the *Exposition internationale coloniale* in 1931, artists associated with Futurism created artworks for the regime's pavilion that drew upon French primitivism in order to promote fascist colonialism. Indeed, modernist primitivism became one of the several aesthetics used by the regime; most notably, it appeared in large-scale, public works such as Enrico Prampolini's murals for the *Mostra Triennale delle Terre Italiane d'Oltremare* in Naples. In other words, the use of African sources or representation of Africans in modern Italian art developed well into late Fascism and did not lead to

nuanced debates that questioned racism or colonialism, as had occurred in France, and to a lesser degree in the United States and in Germany before Nazism.

Soffici's adoption and subsequent repudiation of primitivism is a notable part of Italian modernism, and should lead us to reconsider Italy's eccentric contribution to European primitivism. As I have shown, the artist adapted French primitivism in order to present an alternative to German political and cultural hegemony in his pastoral frescoes at Bulciano and later refuted this integration of non-Western elements into a pastoral in order to support the fascist regime. More importantly, his later writings on Libya and on fascist imperialism prove that Italian primitivism survived well into late Fascism, revealing the need for a more thorough engagement with the ways in which this country deployed this strand.

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