

FASCISM^{ON}THE FACADE

Much of modern Rome was shaped by the Fascists of the 1920s and '30s, but many tourists on their way to the Colosseum fail to see the remnants of *la voce d'Italia*.



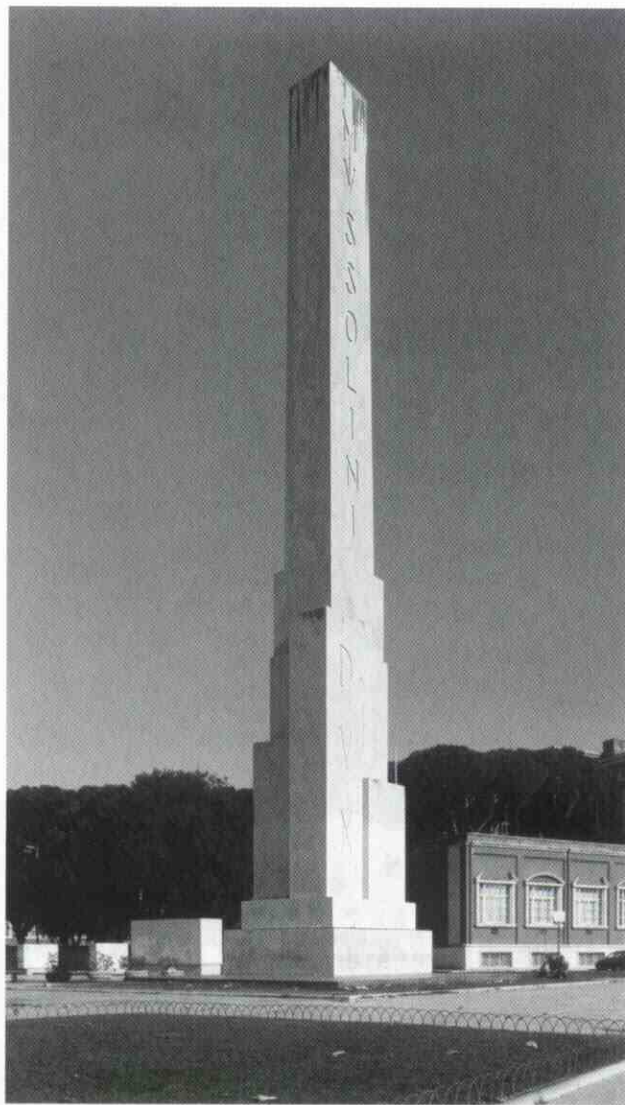
By Paul Shaw



Rome, the Eternal City, is as much the city of Benito Mussolini and the Fascists as it is the city of emperors and popes. Italo Insolera, author of *Roma Fascista* (2001), goes so far as to claim that “more than anyone else Mussolini is the true author of modern Rome.” This may seem surprising to those familiar only with the Rome of Frommer’s, Fodor’s, and Dorling Kindersley—the Rome of St. Peter’s Basilica, the Trevi Fountain, the Spanish Steps, and the Colosseum. In Rome today, much of what we see—and don’t see—can be traced to the archaeological excavations and urban planning of the Fascist era.

Due to the frenzied building activity during that era, entire neighborhoods were demolished to make way for the grand avenues that lead from the Tiber River to St. Peter’s, through the Roman Forum to the Colosseum, and around the Capitoline Hill. While the avenues of modern Rome afford us the sweeping views of these landmarks as well as access to the Theater of Marcellus and the excavated portions of the Roman Forum and Trajan’s Markets, there is very little of medieval Rome left. Mussolini himself said, as early as 1924, “After the Rome of the Caesars, after that of the Popes, there is today a Rome that is Fascist, which simultaneously combines the antique and the modern.” The Fascists attempted to unearth the glories of Ancient Rome while creating modern architecture that not only promoted the regime but housed all of the citizens displaced by its urban planning activities.

Tourists may be unaware that Fascist architecture—fountains,



Mussolini Obelisk, 1932. This modern obelisk, made of Carrara marble, is the central element in the Foro Italico (formerly Foro Mussolini), the physical-education complex founded by Enrico del Debbio in 1928 that became the principal site for the 1960 Olympics in Rome. Located in Piazza de Bosis (the former Piazza dell’Impero), and designed by Costantino Costantini, this boxy, square-cut monument forms the central axis of the site in alignment with the Ponte Duca d’Aosta and the Stadio Olimpico. The vertical inscription MVSSOLINI DVX (Latin for *Il Duce*) is the most prominent example of the use of Mussolini’s name to survive wartime desecration. Photo by Jacob Straub.

monuments, public works, buildings—pervades Rome. Non-Italian guidebooks deliberately ignore these structures, and their modernism makes them seem boringly familiar—even at the most ponderous and grandiose—to anyone visiting from another large city. However, there is one thing above all else that separates Fascist architecture from modern architecture: the conspicuous presence of lettering.

Lettering, inscribed and in relief, had always been an integral part of Western architecture until the Modernists, in their drive for purity and functionality, threw it out along with ornaments and other decorative motifs. In Italy, lettering survived and flourished in Fascist architecture because it served to advertise the regime’s aims and accomplishments.

While the Nazis settled the centuries-old *fraktur oder antiqua* (blackletter versus roman) debate in favor of the former, the Fascists never had an official policy regarding letterforms. “The idea of an ‘art of the State’ was rejected not only by Mussolini and his minister Giuseppe Bottai, but also by all the official representatives of the regime,” wrote Rossana Bossaglia in *Ritratto di un’Idea* (2002). Instead, beginning in 1926, the regime spoke of Fascist art as work that interpreted and represented the spirit of the Fascist movement. But no precise style was defined until the late 1930s. Often overlooked and mistaken for lettering from other periods, the visual language of the Fascists still permeates many of Rome’s most historic buildings.

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The Timeline. In the Fascist era, from the March on Rome in October 1922 to the capture and execution of Mussolini in July 1943, lettering had no set style, though four distinctive phases can be discerned. Each of these phases reflected shifts in the architectural currents of the time. All text and photos by Paul Shaw, unless otherwise noted.

1922–1926 • The Fascists were more concerned with consolidating power than with managing a public image. Lettering on buildings from this period tends to be an eclectic mix of 19th-century styles.

Asilo-Scuola, 1926. Detail of V-cut inscription for a public school on via B. Peruzzi in the Monte Celio area, near the Baths of Caracalla. The letters are not of any definable style.



1927–1930 • Fascist lettering is often carved in a pseudoclassical style—serifed roman capitals are reminiscent, though far from imitative, of Imperial Roman capitals such as those on the celebrated inscription at the base of Trajan's Column. This period saw the first wave of public works by the regime as well as the rise of a distinctly nationalist style of architecture. Stile Littorio, formulated in 1925 by architects Marcello Piacentini and Enrico del Debbio, leaders of the Scuola Romana, was intended to evoke the grandeur of Ancient Rome. At its heart was the concept of *romanità*, the use of Roman materials such as travertine and thin Roman brick over steel and glass. The Art Deco influence followed the 1925 Exposition des Arts Décoratifs et Industriels Modernes in Paris.

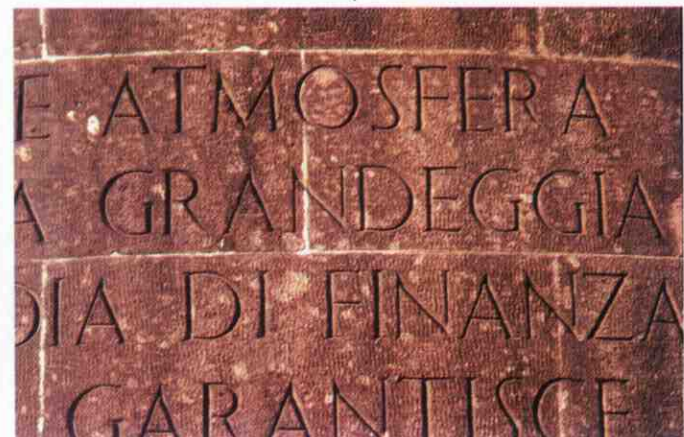
A detail of the address of the Istituto per le Case Popolari apartment building, 1927, in Garbatella: LOTTO 42 PORTINERIA ALLA SCALA (Lot 42 porter's lodge to the stairs) shows raised and painted stucco letters in Art Deco style. Garbatella, a neighborhood south of central Rome, was created in the 1920s as an English-style garden suburb with buildings in the barochetto style of 16th- to 18th-century Rome.

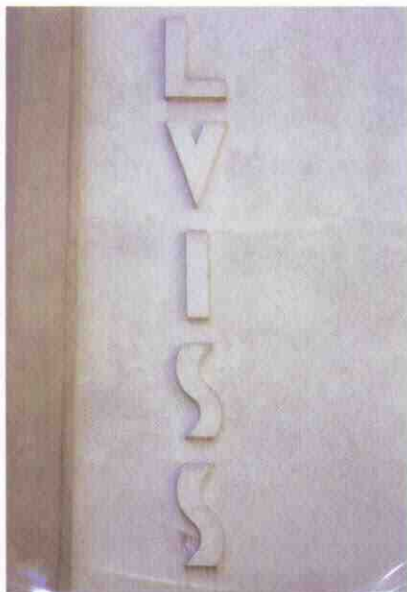


In the fountain at Piazza Mazzini, 1927, a detail of V-CUT inscription on one of the marble posts surrounding the fountain reads: IMPERIVM. The lettering is in a pseudo-Trajanic style (as with the splayed M). Note the fasces on either side of the inscription. The fountain, whose water supply is connected to the Trevi Fountain, was erected as part of the fifth-anniversary celebration of Fascism.

Monument to the Guardia di Finanza (Customs Service), 1930, erected in Piazza XXI Aprile (April 21st, the putative date of Rome's founding in the 8th century, B.C., made into a national holiday by Mussolini). The rough brown stone was used for several other monuments in the late 1920s and for at least one large Fascist structure. Inscriptions run around the top and the lower section.

On the monument to the Guardia di Finanza, 1930, the four-part inscription on the lower section of the monument is Trajan-inspired. The inscription features both a splayed M and a narrow S.





1931–1936 • In this period, Fascist lettering is almost entirely sans serif. Semplicità, the first Italian typeface inspired by Futura, was released by Nebiolo of Torino in 1930. Three years later, the German pavilion at the Milano Triennale, designed by Paul Renner (and including a display of Futura, which he designed) created a sensation among Italian architects, especially Modernists affiliated with the Movimento per l'Architettura Razionalista. The Rationalist architects, supported by Bottai, had begun to carry out commissions for the regime as early as 1931, even though they were philosophically opposed to the Scuola Romana. Sans serif lettering, often constructed on a grid, can be found not only on their buildings but on some of those designed by conservative architects.

Detail of inscription on Università LUISS (formerly the Casa di Lavoro per i Ciechi di Guerra), designed by Pietro Aschieri in 1931. Located at the corner of via Rovereto and via Parenza, the building has been compared favorably to the best of Le Corbusier's work of the period. The sinuous pair of S's gives the inscription an Art Deco feel.

The Monument to the Bersaglieri, 1932, was erected in the Piazza di Porta Pia in the tenth year of the Fascist regime to honor the light infantrymen who fought under Garibaldi in the campaign to unify Italy. The inscriptions on both sides list names and dates of key battles in the struggle to liberate Italy from foreign and papal rule.



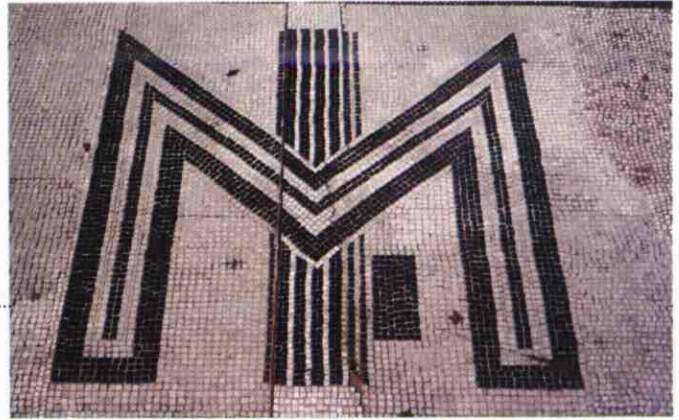
Detail of an inscription on the Monument to the Bersaglieri. V-cut and painted red, the capitals have exaggerated forked serifs and tall Ts in imitation of Imperial Roman capitals.

Detail of the western side of the Casa a Gioventù, 1933, designed by Luigi Moretti, one of the most celebrated of Italy's modern architects, at largo Ascanghi 5. The inscription is in two parts: GIOVENTU ITALIANA DEL LITTORIO A · XV at the top of the facade (not visible in the photograph) and NECESSARIO VINCERE PIV NECESSARIO COMBATTERE, above the doorway. The Gioventù Italiana del Littorio was the Fascist youth organization; "A · XV, Year 15" in the Fascist system of dating, is 1937. The text—"It is important to win, but more important to fight"—is a slogan of Mussolini's that was painted on buildings throughout Italy and used in inscriptions. The letters are extended and have tiny serifs. Photo by Jacob Straub.



1936–1942 • The formation of the Berlin-Rome Axis in mid-1936 marked the beginning of the final phase of the Fascist regime, during which the government often seemed to try to match the accomplishments and rhetoric of its Nazi partner. From 1936 to 1942, when construction on major projects ground to a halt under the pressures of war, Fascist buildings took on a new pomposity. By 1938, Piacentini's *romanità* had supplanted the fusion of rationalism, urbanism, and classicism that had prevailed for most of the decade. Not coincidentally, there was a return to the use of classical capitals, but in a more confident form than those of the 1920s. However, some buildings—including several not completed until after the war—continued to employ sans serif letters.

Detail of the mosaics that line the center of the viale del Foro Italo (formerly viale Mussolini), 1937. The sans serif *M* (representing Mussolini) depicted with fasces is repeated several times. It is splayed in the classical manner.



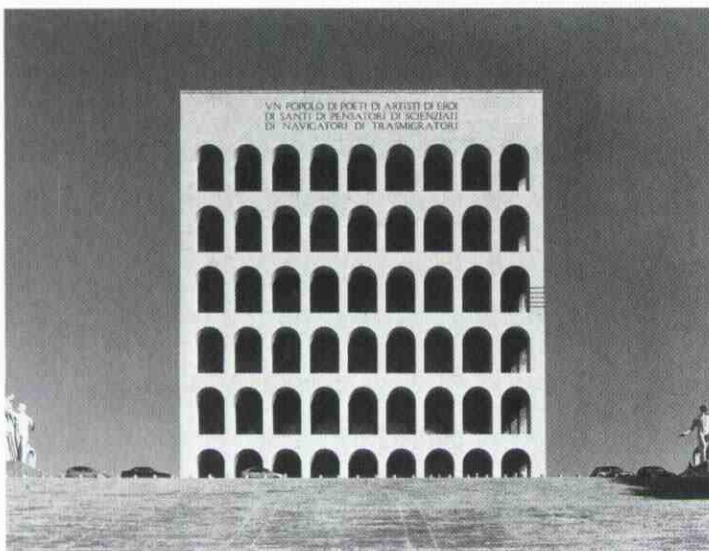
In this detail of the Foro Italo, the central image shows an Abyssinian (Ethiopian)—probably Emperor Haile Selassie, because he is flanked by a lion—saluting an Italian soldier bearing the Italian flag. The text IX MAGGIO XIV E.F. L'ITALIA HA VINTO IL SUO IMPERO ("9 May, Year 14 of the Fascist Era [1936]. Italy has won its empire") marks the end of the Italian-Ethiopian War begun the year before. The black-and-white mosaics (in the ancient Roman style) of the viale del Foro were designed by Giulio Rosso, Angelo Canevari, Achille Capizzano, and the Futurist Gino Severini, who was responsible for the most important images, including this one.



The second slab on the left side of the viale del Foro Italo: II OTT. MCMXXXV IL DVCE ANNUNZIA AL POPOLO L'INIZIO DELLA GVERRA CONTRO L'ABISSINIA ("2 October 1935. Il Duce announces to the people the beginning of the war against Abyssinia"). The shallow V-cut letters have more hints of Gill Sans than of Futura. Note the graffiti and the whitewash (covering earlier graffiti).

The western facade—identical to the other three—of the Colosseo Quadrato (Square Colosseum), 1943. Officially called the Palazzo della Civiltà del Lavoro when it was constructed (1938–1943), this iconic building of the Fascist era has been used for a variety of purposes. It was designed by Giovanni Guerrini, Ernesto La Padula, and Mario Romano. The black-infilled inscription on each of the facades—VN POPOLO DI POETI DI ARTISTI DI EROI DI SANTI DI PENSATORI DI SCIENZIATI DI NAVIGATORI DI TRASMIGRATORI ("A people of poets, of artists, of heroes, of saints, of thinkers, of scientists, of navigators, of immigrants")—is rendered in classical capitals. The forced justification ruins its monumental effect.

Detail of the eastern facade of the Palazzo degli Uffici dell'Ente Autonomo EUR, 1939, designed by Gaetano Minnucci. The full inscription, which stretches for a city block, reads: QVINDI LA TERZA ROMA SI DILATERA SOPRA ALTRI COLLI LVNGO DEL RIVE DEL FIVME SACRO SINO ALLE SPIAGGE DEL TIRRENO ("Hence the third Rome expands from the high hills along the banks of the sacred river as far as the beaches of the Tyrrhenian Sea"). The third Rome is that of the Fascists, following the first two Romes of the emperors and of the popes; the sacred river is the Tiber. The inscription is in black-infilled classical letters. Photo by Jacob Straub.



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