

Testata Ulisse 2000
N°/Anno I
Data 1981

AMERICAN ITALOLOGY
Garibaldi and Gucci, Palladio and Ferrari: traces of Italy across America
by Milton Gendel

The American tendency to see Italy in high color is endorsed by history. We owe the very names of America and Columbia (the Gem of the Ocean) to Italians, while our most celebrated national monuments derive their cool commanding air from Vitruvius and Palladio. But here the ties lie latent and forgotten for most Americans, with awareness of things Italianate vibrating rather to the name of the Verrazano Bridge and the memory of Fiorello La Guardia, sometime Mayor of New York. And a host of new associations with the arts and enterprises of Italy, from the lovely face of Sophia Loren (or Gina Lollobrigida or Silvana Pampanini) to the massively level look of the Watergate complex, built by an Italian firm.

Italian themes in any case must be part of American life, since in the ethnic amalgam, representing more or less equitably the 18th-century ideal of egalitarianism, one out of every five citizens or so has Italian forebears or connections. The Italian element in the American mix, however, did not consist mainly of gentlemen like Jefferson's friend, Filippo Mazzei, who was high in the councils of the Revolution, or Lorenzo Da Ponte, Mozart's librettist and later an Italian teacher in New York. And Garibaldi's stay in Staten Island was very brief. In the flood of late 19th- and early 20th-century immigration most of the Italians were farming people and laborers from the impoverished former Kingdom of the Two Sicilies.

Like other markedly characterizable newcomer groups before them, such as the Irish, the Germans and the Jews, they went through a period of raillery and hazing, the butt of ethnic jokes and vaudeville skits. As late as Tennessee Williams' *The Rose Tattoo*, was it the curdling contralto of a Tallulah Bankhead or the dubbed voice of Anna Magnani that said, "Them Eytalians are at it again"?

A generic type of Italian was immortalized by Chico Marx (or perhaps he was supposed to be Spanish), with a comic command of broken English and high skill in playing the piano with P38 gestures. The type had its hilarious climax in Jack Oakie's impersonation of Mussolini in *The Great Dictator*. But few prominent Italians in real life caught the American public eye between the two World Wars.

Sacco and Vanzetti put American justice in question. Al Capone epitomized the inexorability of death and taxes. Native sons of Italian extraction like Joe Di Maggio, the baseball hero, Don Ameche, the movie star, and Frank Sinatra, the celebrated crooner, showed again that one generation in God's Country could produce Americans as indigenous as pumpkin pie. But possibly the most brilliant Italian luminary of the time was Arturo Toscanini, the great conductor.

Americans may not have been steeped in Dante, Petrarch, Leopardi, Vico or Croce, but everyone had heard, or heard of, Rossini, Verdi, Puccini and Respighi.

Along with music and the opera, cultivated Americans went in for the Italian Renaissance, and houses on Long Island, Park Avenue and even Central Park West, were furnished like Venetian and Florentine palaces. The cross currents between the two countries were not even, however. For one Italian writer like Mario Soldati visiting the United States, ten thousand American tourists took to the Lido and Capri. Meanwhile the migrant wave of American artists, writers and students in Italy had receded.

Columbia, in her guise of an ancient Roman matron, had also symbolized Italian classical civilization. A stay in Italy meant getting at the font of classicism. Vanguard art destroyed this necessity, and for Americans Italy became the premier picturesque vacationland. Paramount among the survivors of the great cultural tradition, the art seer Bernard Berenson went on over the decades cataloguing Old Masters and holding court at I Tatti, the Florentine villa that he made into a little principality of art history. Italian princes were still insuring their descent by marrying American heiresses. But Hemingway, with *A Farewell to Arms*, was the last in a long succession of American writers that had crooked a Gothic line from Hawthorne's *Marble Faun* to Henry James's *Daisy Miller*, and included sunnier or more dappled moments from Longfellow, Mark Twain, William Dean Howells, Francis Marion Crawford and Edith Wharton.

Inspired, loony and treacherous, Ezra Pound's career bridged the pre-war and post-war scene. But in another kind of poetry in politics a party formed in Sicily to secede from the mother country and become the 50th state of the U.S.A, Dismemberment did not take place. The Marshal Plan helped Italy overcome the devastation of World War II, and on its feet with a bound, it then passed the Italian Miracle. Agnellis and Pirellis commuted between the two countries.

Fortune magazine dwelt on the prophetic powers of Adriano Olivetti as an industrialist. For his social vision and good taste in advertising and design he was compared to Lorenzo de' Medici. Sporadically, from the vantage of the American Academy in Rome, writers like William Styron, Eleanor Clark, Richard Wilbur, Robert Penn Warren, Harold Bordkey, John Hersey, Alfred Kazin and Mary McCarthy rediscovered the Italian scene and for a season Willem de Kooning painted his dramatic black and whites in Via Margutta.

At the same time *La Dolce Vita* keyed in perfectly with the new unabashed hedonism, and *Arrivederci Roma* became almost as tediously familiar as *O Sole Mio*.

More and more Italians appeared on the screen of American awareness. Besides the long familiar Giorgio De Chirico and Massimo Campigli, such artists as Morandi, Afro, Burri, Scialoja and Dorazio were shown in the U.S. *Christ Stopped at Eboli* and *The Leopard* became best sellers. Editions of Silony Moravia and Bassani were published, and Pasolini — not for the translations of his Friulano poetry — became a cult figure.

Quasimodo's name reached America, via Stockholm, after he won the Nobel Prize.

And on a broader horizon De Sica, Rossellini, Fellini, Antonioni, Germi and even Wertmuller joined the movie goers' pantheon. While on the ethnic home front, in an orgy of immigrant nostalgia, *The Godfather* offered an indulgent cavalcade of Family life.

As the high tide of affluence ebbed, the last of the old American residents in Italy held out here and there. Gore Vidal issued effervescent and acerbic commentaries on Italy and *Life* from his crag at Ravello.

Bill Weaver, the *Sterlings* and the *Peppers* held to arts and letters on their hilltops in Tuscany and Umbria. But a new part-time emigration, this time of the well to do, toward the Golden Door, had established so many of the high luxury trades in the U.S. that an American no longer had to travel to Via Condotti to compete with a busload of Japanese tourists in clearing Gucci's shelves. He could do it right at home, on Fifth Avenue.

No single image but a whole gallery of pictures of Italy holds the American eye. *Bel Paese* can be a plain-spoken cheese or the land where lemons and Ferraris, sex tigers, latterday cowboys (in designer jeans), Puccis and Guccis grow, The sophisticated and the popular intersect. Verdi's *Requiem* and *Furiicuh Funiculd*. The well-bred murmur of a Ferrari and the old plinkplunk of a mandolin. Orangeade and a Brunello di Montalcino. Ruby bracelets from.

Bulgari's and pottery souvenirs. Passetto's cuisine and rotisserie pork.
The Garden of Europe is also the motherland of Pizza Pie.