

Introduction

Italian American Material Culture: Setting the Ground

Elisabetta Marino

According to Christopher Tilley, “The object world is [...] absolutely central to an understanding of the identities of individual persons and societies” (61). Objects and commodities serve as tangible representations of our past, present and future; they function as a medium that enables individuals and communities to express themselves, articulating personal histories and collective cultural narratives. In turn, objects are seemingly endowed with what Arjun Appadurai has termed “a social life”: their silent presence (or absence) shapes one’s everyday life, as well as providing insight into the structure and system of values of various social groups.

Objects acquire a crucial importance in the context of migration, described by Paolo Bartoloni as “a physical, emotional, and psychological test” (96), suggesting that such experience might lead to feelings of depression and alienation, often juxtaposed with temporary states of elation and euphoria. Due to the high relocation expenses and the limited storage capacity onboard, not all belongings and possessions could travel along with the Italian emigrants to America: circumstances dictated a meticulous selection process. Cherished heirlooms, as well as useful tools and valuable items were carefully chosen to accompany migrants on their journey, furnishing them with a sense of comfort and security amidst an uncertain future. Acting as potent talismans endowed with a semi-magical power, they ritualistically contributed to transforming new houses into homes, “meaningful place[s]” (Bartoloni 98) that sheltered vulnerable subjectivities in need of reinvention and

redefinition. At times, freshly-purchased objects, markers of the settlers' acquired economic influence and stability, were placed alongside relics of the past, to visually represent one's progress and achievements. American artifacts and luxury goods occasionally followed the reverse path: transferred to Italy when emigrants visited their motherland, they increased the sense of wonder that had originally drawn many Italian peasants to the promised land of opportunities.

Laura Ruberto and Joseph Sciorra, who have devoted considerable time and efforts to investigate the connection between Italian emigration and material culture, have identified five categories or areas (aside from food and preparation equipment) that help classify "Italian American stuff" (16-54): home and domesticity (tablecloths, embroidered towels and linen, knitted or crocheted garments)¹; architecture and vernacular structures (such as chapels, churches, home altars, *presepi* – Christmas nativity scenes –, roadside shrines, ovens specifically designed to bake pizza or bread);² landscapes (*bocce* courts, burial grounds, Little Italies – frequently turned into tourist attractions, through a lucrative process of self-commodification –, vegetable gardens, where Italian vegetables were lovingly grown); statuary and public monuments (plaster casts, stone carvings, statues of saints or prominent Italians in America, such as Mother Cabrini or Columbus); display environments and museums, intended to memorialize both hardships and successes. Casa Italia in Chicago (<https://casaitaliachicago.org/library-museums/>) stands as a significant example: in its premises, a Sicilian Heritage Museum, the Italians in Chicago Exhibit (a collection of photos, objects, oral history tapes and their transcripts), and the Scalabrini Museum (dedicated to the missionaries who have assisted migrants and refugees in America) are hosted, together with other artistic displays and memorabilia.

The essays comprising this special issue of *JAST* will undoubtedly elucidate several of the aforementioned aspects, with a particular emphasis on food, a common thread among most of the articles. To lay the groundwork for the analyses carried out by both emergent and well-established scholars, some statements by prominent Italian American artists, poets, researchers have been here collected. Their words will indisputably pave the way for the more in-depth investigations that will follow.

Maria Mazziotti Gillan

“For me, objects and mementos represent all the ways my mother tried to teach us about Italy, although we could not go there ourselves. For example, she brought a big black metal trunk full of *biancheria* [linen] when she married my father, and came to America in steerage. This trunk was really important to her, because it was filled with all the dresses, scarves and nightgowns and towels and other kitchen objects that she made as part of her dowry. The pieces were often very rough, homemade pieces. I can remember towels; they were very rough to the touch, but had very delicate flowers embroidered on them. They represented the Italy she left behind and tried to bring with her to share with us, so that Italy would be a real place for us. I still use her handmade tablecloth and dresser scarves 25 years after she died, and I use an exquisite tablecloth made by my grandmother more than 100 years ago. My mother could not afford to give us the kind of heirlooms wealthy people have, but she gave us things that she had made in Italy as a girl with the material she had on hand. And they represented for her the Italy she loved. They were symbols of the love she had for us and what she was trying to pass on” (Marino, personal correspondence with Maria Mazziotti Gillan, 6 November 2023).³

Maria Terrone

“As a child visiting my Sicilian-born grandmother in her Manhattan railroad flat, I was mesmerized by the flickering votive candles, holy cards, and saints’ statues standing watch on her dresser. In the otherwise dark, windowless bedroom, they communicated mystery, her deep religious devotion, and perhaps the most essential part of her past life carried with her into the New World. My mother Concetta (“Connie”), the only child in the family who was born in America, rejected Old World ways but never her parents’ Catholicism. And so, at age 99, my mother sleeps at home beneath a huge picture of the Sacred Heart, and her dresser top is filled with candles, albeit electric ones, and her favorite saints. In my own bedroom I cherish an exquisitely embroidered pillowcase that my mother gave me, a gift to her from her mother who was my only living grandparent. This splendid creation from my grandmother’s trousseau lies buried at the bottom of a cedar chest—another tangible link to my Italian heritage and two generations

of women” (Marino, personal correspondence with Maria Terrone, 9 November 2023).⁴

Louisa Calio

“I have a few treasures left from my family. My grandfather Rocco Marchesani’s hand carved mahogany box lined with velvet and covered with cherubs in my possession and an inlaid table he made for our cousin Mike. Then, there is a page of my mother Rose M. Marchesani’s graduation yearbook from Lafayette high where my father Joe Calio, her boyfriend Joe, wrote a sweet note: ‘May you always be the Queen of happiness with a little sadness so your heart will know the difference.’ The third is an old white tablecloth hand-embroidered in blue thread by my Grandmother Angie (whose hands hand seasoning, like in the title of one of my poems), Angelina Consolmagno. My grandfather’s furniture was shared among the Marchesanis who had the space for it” (Marino, personal correspondence with Louisa Calio, 7 November 2023).⁵

Maria Famà

“Material objects that have been lovingly handed down through the generations are objects of solace and inspiration for me. I have written poems about my great-great grandmother’s tablecloth which she wove, my great-grandmother’s large apron that she worked in, and my father’s little hat that he wore on his journey from Sicily to America. These material objects bring me comfort. They are talismans that I use, honor, preserve, and treasure because they connect me to my ancestors, no matter the distance in time and place of origin, in my case Sicilia. They give me strength to deal with the uncertainties of life because they are imbued with the perseverance and endurance of those members of my family who once owned these material items when they walked the earth before me” (Marino, personal correspondence with Maria Famà, 7 November 2023).⁶

Al Tacconelli

“The roots of belonging surround me every day in ‘objects of memory;’ they foster continuity with the past and reflect my non-Italian world. I find their nurturing presence in the following objects:

- Sterling silver spoon used only for sugar, we called, of course, the sugar spoon. Once I crushed *Brioschi*, the white crystals mixed with sugar in coffee caused everyone a surprise laugh.
- Above the dining room and kitchen door are two crucifixes—one from Nonno’s funeral and the other from Ma’s.
- In the bedroom closet hangs the long-sleeved plaid shirt with Nonna’s skillfully sewed patches. I wore this a long time ago in high school.
- Ma’s wood mixing spoons fill a green, heavily glazed flowerpot bought at Woolworth’s Five and Dime store.
- On the kitchen counter is displayed Wanamaker’s large black serving tray hand-painted with pink roses; this is the tray I served Ma’s last supper the night before she was taken by ambulance to the Bryn Mawr Hospital.
- On the doorbell fixture sits Nonna’s painted plaster Infant of Prague—a penny tucked under the Infant’s feet ensures that I will never be poor.
- Nonno’s very large hand blown 20-gallon glass wine bottle; it is my pride and joy. I remember it among the other bottles as a little boy.
- To keep my father warm Aunt Loretta wove a brightly colored Afghan—and I remember when my brother Johnny was born, I spent the summer with my aunt and uncle in Clifton Heights. I remember helping uncle Orestes whitewash the driveway’s low stone wall.
- *Immaginette* or holy cards used as page markers are tucked inside some of my books.

‘Objects of memory’ provide a sense of my place in a non-Italian world. As mentioned already, much of my past life has been erased. A strong sense of the identity comes from these ‘objects of memory.’ In them I see images of my childhood’s vanished world. Throughout the day I sense my beloved Italian family’s vividly alive heritage. Without their nurturing presence I would feel more deeply my life’s long alienation” (Marino, personal correspondence with Al Tacconelli, 7 November 2023).⁷

Susan Caperna Lloyd

“My most precious piece of Italian American material culture is my Italian father’s icon of the Madonna of Loreto, which he acquired in Ancona, Italy, when he stepped ashore for a leave during WWII, when he was in the US Merchant Marine. He then tried to cross Italy to find his relatives in Frosinone, but he said he turned back because he couldn’t understand the dialect. He never found or reunited with the family his parents had left, departing from the US in 1922. He kept the Madonna by his bedside for 50 years in Oregon until his death. My sister, Angela, until her tragic death (written about in my current memoir, *Dance It Up! Travels from Spain to India to Find the End of Grief*) then acquired it. After her death, I then became the protector of the Madonna and I have taken it on EVERY journey or trip I’ve taken myself... or it is by my bedside. Dad prized this icon and believed it protected him, as I believe it does me. He believed the Madonna was flown to Italy from the ‘East.’ This Madonna was also my introduction to the healing Black Madonna and dark deities I have sought in many different forms from Sicily and other parts of Europe to Latin America, the Philippines and India” (Marino, personal correspondence with Susan Caperna Lloyd, 9 November 2023).⁸

Karen Tintori

“In my bedroom, I keep family memorabilia in the wood and stamped tin humpback steamer chest my paternal great-grandmother brought in steorage from Sestola, Modena province. In my kitchen, the 18” long stainless-steel spoon my maternal Sicilian grandfather stirred *sugo* with in his truck stop diner. Next to my computer, the pocket watch

my paternal grandfather from Fanano, Modena, wore. I also treasure the hankies my grandmothers embellished with crocheted lace” (Marino, personal correspondence with Karen Tintori, 7 November 2023).⁹

Dominic Candeloro

“I remember my mother’s rolling pin and the rectangular wooden board she placed on top of the kitchen table to make pasta and bread. *Spinatore?* [*spianatoia*] I remember the mountain of white flour and then the eggs that went on top of the mountain. The mixing with a wooden spoon, then her hands (she’d let me help) and finally rolling the lump into a thin circle. Next it was cut into two-inch-wide strips, run through the machine and flattened some more, then run through the sharp blades to create limp, moist pasta which was put to bed on bag-paper spread out over every flat surface in our bedrooms” (Marino, personal correspondence with Dominic Candeloro, 25 November 2023).¹⁰

Mary Saracino

“I have an apron that my Grandma Saracino wore. It has meatball grease permanently embedded in it, even after years of washing it. It also has a safety pin in its bodice that she had pinned there, for what, I do not know. I wear this apron every time I make homemade ravioli, even though it was my maternal Grandma Vergamini whose legacy I embody when I make ravioli. In this way, I honor both of my immigrant grandmothers” (Marino, personal correspondence with Mary Saracino, 7 November 2023).¹¹

Fred Gardaphé

“Ever since I read Alice Walker’s short story, ‘Everyday Use,’ I have thought differently about the material legacy I have maintained in my life through the objects that I have kept, which were once part of the daily lives of my ancestors: the *falchino* my nonno kept in his pocket for cutting plants and anything that needed separation from its roots; the never rusting Mouli cheese grater I used to render Pecorino

Romano into hills for our Sunday dinners; my mother's wooden spoon that stirred her culinary masterpieces, that also worked as scepter and a behavioural adjustment tool; the eye loupe that helped my father closely examine rings and things that came into our pawnshop. These and many more keep alive memories and the stories I now tell to my grandchildren, as I wonder, what will they keep of me when to pass on my story" (Marino, personal correspondence with Fred L. Gardaphé, 6 November 2023).¹²

Donna Chirico

"The Tenement Museum in New York City has an interactive exhibit about immigration that includes asking visitors: What would you bring with you on the voyage to the new world? Given you likely had one suitcase, what treasures would you take and what would you leave behind? Most took photographs, others religious artifacts, still others cookware. When I think about what Italian 'relics' are important to me, that are part of the 'who am I' of identity, the items that mean the most are the ones given to me by my grandmother. The one that stands out is her engagement ring. My grandmother was bought bride (for \$50.00). I can only imagine the journey as a teenager to America to marry someone she never met. That ring must have seemed like a king's fortune to her and certainly did not portend the difficult life she would have. I keep that ring as a reminder of the journey, struggles, and triumphs that led to the present" (Marino, personal correspondence with Donna Chirico, 7 November 2023).¹³

Michelle Reale

"I inherited my maternal grandmother's prayer books, a few of which are in Italian, her rosaries, her holy cards and death cards. They are the totems of the way she lived her life. I handle them almost as sacred objects. I interpret them and photograph them as I have with many of the things left to me or that I have claimed for my own from my parents and grandparents as a way to remind myself of the temporality of life – that our things outlive us and that objects handled by someone over a lifetime have energy. That the culture of Italian-American life can be told by the things that provided meaning and accompanied

one on their journey through life. They are indicative of a way of life, culture and being in the world” (Marino, personal correspondence with Michelle Reale, 6 November 2023).¹⁴

Chiara Montalto Giannini

“The sun streams through a curtain at the window where I sit. This cream-colored curtain was embroidered by hands that never held me but to whom I am connected through the unspoken bonds of blood and time. *Biancheria*: linens, hand-embroidered linens, curtains, tablecloths, table runners, doilies, coasters, a dowry of sorts, embroidered by my great-grandmothers, the women who came before me. I can’t sew anything, not even a button, but I have the *biancheria*, all folded neatly in a trunk, except the curtain. That stays out on the window, where it catches the late afternoon sun. These linens made the transatlantic journey by boat from southern Italy to New York. First, they adorned Manhattan tenements, then Brooklyn apartments and homes, great-grandmothers to grandmothers to mothers and aunts, to me. This curtain is tall, long, and made for an Italian window or door – not a small North American window. Though it’s hung and draped nicely on my bedroom window, it, like me, clearly doesn’t fit in perfectly. Its intricate pattern of animals and flowers, each in a separate and entirely hand-tatted panel. This was made before devices stole our attention spans, when time was an asset, and means were creativity and talent. Not only do I have the *biancheria*, but I also have many of their objects – pots and pans, cast iron, pasta pots, tomato grinders and food mills, their serving dishes, their Neapolitan *macchinette* for black coffee. When my husband, who is an Italian immigrant from Florence, saw those ancient coffee pots, he had only ever seen them before in history books. In that moment, he understood that our very real Italian-American culture is, in many ways, Southern Italian culture from one hundred years ago. I’ve been told that ‘you can feel the ancestors’ in our home. I take that as a compliment. For their journeys, struggles, accomplishments, and pain, all of that – led me to existence, to here, to now, gazing at the late afternoon sun beaming in through the curtain” (Marino, personal correspondence with Chiara Montalto Giannini, 9 November 2023).¹⁵

Mary Beth Moser

“I always wished that I had something physical that belonged to my maternal grandmother, who died three years before I was born. The only item of hers that existed was her gold wedding band. My grandmother likely wore it for 45 years, until her death, and my mother wore it another 60 years or so before giving it to my sister. Four years ago, my sister gifted it to me for my birthday while we were in Trentino, Italy. I slipped it on the middle finger of my right hand where it has been ever since. It is a daily reminder of the sacrifices of my grandmother as an immigrant. When I lament having troubles, I see the gold ring and recognize that, by comparison, my challenges are small. The gold also reminds me of the men’s sacrifice, often with their lives and lungs, in the mines of Colorado. Both of my grandmothers were widowed at a young age and with children to care for. Knowing that my mother also wore this ring links me to my motherline. Although it has surely witnessed strife and loss, this gold ring symbolizes for me strength and resilience. It reminds me to be grateful” (Marino, personal correspondence with May Beth Moser, 26 November 2023).¹⁶

Christina Marrocco

“Memories of objects from or symbolizing Italy are strong in myself and in my family. But always it is a person who is the real memory, and the object is simply a carrier of that person, who is us, us now, and us then, and sweepingly, us always. Whether it is the intricate ivory doilies made by my great grandmother Rosaria Pernice as a means of supporting her many children after the death of her husband or the creche everyone says great grandpa Francesco Marrocco had sent from Sicily to be placed in his front hallway on Taylor Street, Chicago, the blood seems to pulse through these objects, and they are perhaps more alive in memory themselves than if you are the one who has the box in which they are packed under your bed. And here’s a twist: the thing with the creche is this: after a lot of family squabbling over who would be honored with the keeping it, someone discovered a Woolworth’s sticker on the bottom of it. Was that falsehood, or was the story of the sticker a falsehood? No one knows anymore, but what we do know is Francesco kept it in the hallway, where he let in the men and women who came to his flat for healing and prayers. That he was a healer and that this was part of his symbol, and of our story” (Marino, personal correspondence with Christina Marrocco, 30 November 2023).¹⁷

Notes

- ¹As Evan Casey and Deirdre Clemente have pointed out, “what we put on our bodies is perhaps the most personal choice we make as human beings” (7); hence, traditional Italian clothes, hats, headpieces, embroidered gowns are extremely meaningful.
- ²Focusing on New York City, Joseph Sciorra has elsewhere observed that “today, yard shrines, domestic altars, *presepi* (Nativity crèches), extravagant Christmas house displays, and a constellation of street *feste* (religious feasts) and processions are examples of the vibrant and varied ways contemporary Italian Americans have used and continue to use material culture, architecture, ritual behaviour, and public ceremonial display to shape New York City’s religious, cultural, and ethnic landscapes” (xvii).
- ³Maria Mazziotti Gillan is the Founder and Executive Director of the Poetry Center at Passaic County Community College in Paterson, New Jersey, editor of the *Paterson Literary Review* and Professor Emerita of English and Creative Writing at Binghamton University-SUNY. Her newest poetry collection is *When the Stars Were Still Visible* (Stephen F. Austin UP, 2021).
- ⁴Maria Terrone, poetry editor of the journal *Italian Americana*, has published three full-length poetry collections: *Eye to Eye, A Secret Room in Fall* (McGovern Prize, Ashland Poetry Press), and *The Bodies We Were Loaned*, with a new collection, *No Known Coordinates*, forthcoming from The Word.
- ⁵Louisa Calio is an award winning poet: Connecticut Commission Individual Writers, 1978; Finalist Poet Laureate, 2013, Nassau County; 1st Prizes Messina, Sicily, 2013; Il Parnasso Internazionale, Canicatti, Sicily (2015, 2017, 2019). Director Poet’s Piazza, Hofstra Uni 12 years, Co- Founder City Spirit Artists, Inc. New Haven (1976-1986). Her latest book, *Journey to the Heart Waters* (Legas Press, 2014). See Wikipedia https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Louisa_Calio. Accessed 5 December 2023.
- ⁶Maria Famà, author of nine books of poetry, has been featured reading her poems in films. Her forthcoming book, *Trigger*, will

be published in Spring 2024 by Bordighera Press. Famà lives and works in Philadelphia.

⁷ Poet and artist, Al Tacconelli lives in the Philadelphia suburbs. Tacconelli's illustrations are covers for Maria Famà and Maria Mazziotti Gillan poetry books. Tacconelli's poems have appeared in *Paterson Literary Review*, *Endicott Review*; anthologies, *Avanti Popolo*, *The American Voice in Poetry*. Tacconelli has read at Hofstra University; Allen Ginsberg Poetry Contests acknowledged Tacconelli's poems. Bordighera Press published *Perhaps Fly* 2014, Finishingline Press published *Alone at the Border* in 2018, and Moonstone published *Such Things* in 2023.

⁸ Susan Caperna Lloyd is an author, photographer, and filmmaker based in Ashland, Oregon, USA. The daughter of an Italian immigrant with work focusing on transcultural issues of loss and identity, her 30-year archive was recently acquired by the Library of Congress, Washington DC.

⁹ Karen Tintori, a dual citizen of the US and Italy, is an international bestseller of fiction and nonfiction, translated into 25 languages and to film. www.karentintori.com. Accessed 5 December 2023.

¹⁰ Dominic Candeloro is a historian of Italians in Chicago.

¹¹ Mary Saracino is a novelist, poet, and memoir writer. Her maternal and paternal grandparents immigrated to the US in the early 20th century. <https://marysaracino.com/> Accessed 5 December 2023.

¹² Fred L. Gardaphé is Distinguished Professor of English and Italian/American Studies at Queens College/CUNY and the John D. Calandra Italian American Institute. His books include *Italian Signs*, *American Streets: The Evolution of Italian American Narrative*, *Dagoes Read: Tradition and the Italian/American Writer*, *Moustache Pete Is Dead!*, *Leaving Little Italy*, and *From Wiseguys to Wise Men: Masculinities and the Italian American Gangster*. His latest study is *Funny How?: Humor and Irony in Italian American Culture*, that will be published by Penn State UP.

¹³ Donna Chirico is Professor of Psychology and Resident Faculty at the John D. Calandra Italian American Institute, former Dean of the School of Arts and Sciences at York College/CUNY. Chirico serves

as Chair of the Italian American Faculty Staff Advisory Council of the John D. Calandra Italian American Institute, and is President Emeritus of the Italian Language Inter-Cultural Alliance (ILICA).

¹⁴ Dr. Michelle Reale is professor at Arcadia University. Her research interests focus on all aspects of the Italian-American experience narrative inheritance, autoethnography poetic inquiry, and material culture.

¹⁵ Chiara Montalto Giannini is an Italian American, born in Brooklyn, NY, with Sicilian and southern Italian roots. She is an actor, playwright and screenwriter and is the Director of the Writers Guild Initiative.

¹⁶ Mary Beth Moser, PhD, is passionate about her ancestral heritage, the focus of her scholarly research, with a focus on women's lives and folk culture. In 2023 she had the great honor of being invited to present her award-winning dissertation, *The Everyday Spirituality of Women in the Italian Alps*, to the Cultural Center in her grandmother's village, a real-time virtual gathering of Trentini and Trentini Americani in Italy and the US. Moser lives on an island in the Salish Sea where she serves as president of the Seattle Trentino Club. <https://ancestralconnections.net/> Accessed 5 December 2023.

¹⁷ Christina Marrocco is a Sicilian American author, poet, and English Professor, whose collection of Sicilian American linked stories, *Addio, Love Monster*; recently won Best Independent Press Fiction from the CWA.

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