Wednesday, September 24th
6-7:30 pm

6 pm:
Welcome and Opening Remarks
Jeanne Brasile - Director, Walsh Gallery

Remarks on Valente Library
Dr. John Buschman
Dean of the University Libraries

James J. Periconi and Robert Viscusi, Ph.D.,
present readings from
“Literature of the Great Migration”

Audience Q&A

Acknowledgments
Xue - Ming Bao
Dr. John Buschman
Frank Capra
Kara Caroccio
Vanessa Cotto
Jody Lee Draftha
Jillian Lope
Robert Rementeria Jr.
Sierra Van Ryck deGroot
Michael Villanueva
Joseph Yankus
Walsh Gallery Advisory Board

Strangers in a Strange Land
An Exhibition on the History of Italian-language American Imprint
curated by James J. Periconi

New Jersey Council for the Humanities
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Walsh Gallery at Seton Hall University
400 S. Orange Avenue
South Orange, NJ 07079
973-275-2033 | www.shu.edu/walshgallery

Monday, September 8th - Friday, October 17th, 2014
STRANGERS IN A STRANGE LAND

An Exhibition on the History of Italian-language American Imprints

This exhibition upends the commonplace beliefs that all Italian immigrants to America immediately began to learn the English language exclusively for reading, writing and speaking, and that they were virtually totally illiterate. Through this broad and representative sample of publications and related objects, we gain an understanding of a once thriving Italian-language American book, newspaper and magazine publishing industry in the United States, especially in the 50 years before World War II. During this period, known as “The Great Migration,” the Italian American publishing industry created and reflected a vibrant national literary and political culture among a broad spectrum of permanent residents and transient Italians living and working in the United States. The works they published entertained, educated and inflamed an Italian-language audience in that half-century of critical development in Italian American history.

The historical period central to “Strangers in a Strange Land” was tumultuous. The issues remain relevant to the fabric of contemporary American life. A justifiable fear of terrorism from anarchists sworn to overthrow the United States government, and the subsequent deportations of immigrants accused of participating in these activities, parallel events taking place today. Moreover, the suppression of a free press for political reasons, with right and left fighting each other with words and weapons, define both past and present and serve as a backdrop for this exhibition of Italian-language American imprints. The works on view are those of Italian-language writers in the United States who looked back to the mother country for their language, but also tried to come to terms with their American experience.

- James J. Periconi, curator

A STRANGE AND BEAUTIFUL WORLD

“Strangers in a Strange Land” very specifically fosters reflection upon the complex political and historical landscape occupied by Italians immigrating to America roughly from the late 19th century through the end of World War II. During this period, known as The Great Migration, over five million Italians relocated to the United States, most often to escape political turbulence, poverty and harsh living conditions. Upon arriving in America, Italian-Americans faced immense pressure to assimilate due to many factors--including competition for jobs and housing, and virulent prejudice. This situation was exacerbated by Italy’s declaration of war against America in 1941.

The pressure to become American discouraged immigrants from speaking their native tongue. But more pernicious forces subjected Italian immigrants to subject to violence, incarceration or deportation, as well as a host of other anxieties. This confluence of factors created a gap in the ethnic memory of Italian-Americans that continues to the present. Curator James J. Periconi’s outstanding collection of Italian-language books, primarily printed in America, demonstrates the fervent desire of many of these immigrants to retain connections to their culture. Concurrently, Periconi’s vast corpus of literature upends the many stereotypes that defined these early Italian immigrants.

Foremost, Italian-Americans were not as a group illiterate, nor were they uneducated. One only has to look to Periconi’s copy of the 1905 Italian American Directory to see the large number of immigrants who were working in skilled professions such as business entrepreneurs, bankers, attorneys and real estate brokers. Book publishers, such as The Italian Book Company in Manhattan, ran a brisk business both printing and selling books to a public hungry for Italian-language editions. Americans of Italian descent were also highly impactful in organizing the labor force in response to unsafe working conditions, low pay and corrupt management. Many immigrants joined the labor movement as a result of efforts by those like Arturo Giovannitti, one of the organizers responsible for one of America’s most notorious labor battles known as The Great Strike of Lawrence Massachusetts, in 1912.

While this period was highly politicized and fraught with uncertainty, there was a lively performing, visual and literary arts community that afforded Italian-Americans a respite from the turmoil. Periconi’s collection, too, reflects this creative culture. Handbills from Italian-American theatres boast performances by popular Neapolitan singer Ria Rosa at The Fleisher Auditorium and Roosevelt High School in 1957. Rosa was one of the most popular interpreters of Neapolitan music and was known as an eccentric diva and staunch feminist. Song books for popular music, such as the classic “Santa Lucia,” contain the musical notation for this composition celebrating the splendor of the Bay of Naples. Aside from the beauty contained within the volumes, there is also a wealth of artistry in the typography, graphic design and illustrations found on book and magazine covers, as well as engravings and cartoons within, that corroborate an aesthetically inspired quality to this era.

Although “Strangers in a Strange Land” focuses on a specific historical moment, one can draw parallels to the present day and the conditions faced by recent immigrants to this country. Contemporary immigrant populations have been subjected to the same prejudices, violence, unfair working conditions, threats of deportation and hardships faced by immigrants approximately 100 years ago. This survey of Italian-language books speaks to larger issues that petition viewers to confront present-day issues of discrimination on personal and institutional levels. By coming to terms with the Italian-American immigrant experience, we can apply lessons learned in the early 20th century to the present day to foster a culture of tolerance, mutual respect and understanding so that the difficulties faced by our predecessors will not be repeated.

- Jeanne Brasile, Director

Walsh Gallery