Strangers in a Strange Land - an exhibition on the history of Italian-language American Imprints

The Italian Book Company
Italian American Directory Co.

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Acknowledgments

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Michael Villanueva
Joseph Yankus

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Program

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

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
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 intense 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 ethnographic 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. Consequently, 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 undocumented. 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 tumult. Periconi’s collection, too, reflects this creative culture. Handbills from Italian-American theatres boast performances by popular Neapolitans singer Ria Rosa at The Fleisher Auditorium and Roosevelt High School in 1937. 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 current viewers may confront: contemporary 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 galling.

- Jeanne Brasile, Director
Walsh Gallery