

Italian American Stuff: A Survey of Material Culture, Migration, and Ethnicity¹

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Abstract: In this article we offer a critical survey of some approaches to material culture studies within an Italian mobility context, with a focus on Italian American history and culture. We situate our work in relation to greater academic and activist concerns that emphasize the transnational and political while highlighting ideologies that shape how particular kinds of vernacular aesthetic practices are valued or, more likely, devalued, among both hegemonic U.S. culture and the dominant perspectives within Italian American communities. We thus illustrate the ongoing relevance of studying material culture from an Italian American angle, including emerging digital models for doing so.

I thought of my mother,
sewing those coats for years, piles of basting
thread covering her feet, and what we can pass on,
and what we can't and the *biancheria* I have saved
for my daughter and how much else we give
when we try to pass it on.
—“*Biancheria* and my Mother,” Maria Mazziotti Gillan²

“Hey, I’m Italian—we know how to use bricks and tomatoes.”
—Mario Calmi³

In 1942, sculptor Louise Nevelson encountered the bootblack Giovanni Indelicato (1887-1960) near her downtown Manhattan art studio and was struck by his lavishly decorated shoeshine kit. Stopping to admire his encrusted bricolage, Indelicato informed Nevelson that he had yet another one at home, one that he never used and that was, in his opinion “the most beautiful shoeshine stand in the world” (Sciorra 2008a). Upon visiting Indelicato’s home Nevelson beheld a copiously adorned ensemble of shoeshine box, stool, customer’s chair, and two footrests.

Indelicato, who had emigrated at age twenty-three from Sciacca, Sicily, in 1910, had embellished the utilitarian objects with a dazzling arrangement of multicolored buttons, costume jewelry, metal studs, ceramic figurines, and patterned balls, bells, and doorknobs. The seats were upholstered with patterned material and festooned with dangling baubles. When Nevelson told Alfred

H. Barr Jr., Director of the Museum of Modern Art (MoMA), about Indelicato's creation he decided to exhibit what he called a "baroque shrine" in the museum's lobby for a few brief weeks across December 1942 and January 1943. The press covered the display of this Italian American laborer's artistry which Nevelson had proclaimed "subconscious, surrealist art ... an epic of Mediterranean culture" (Sciorra 2008a). Despite this public heralding, the museum re-christened Giovanni Indelicato as Joe Milone in its press release and on the exhibit wall text. In 2014, Indelicato's granddaughter Cherylann Indelicato stated that according to family members, Nevelson deemed his name "too ethnic, too Italian" (Indelicato 2014).

MoMA never acquired or purchased Indelicato's personalized shoeshine kit, and for seven decades it was believed lost to history. In 2014, it surfaced in a small auction house in southern New Jersey, and through the assistance of one of the authors of this essay, Joseph Sciorra, and others, it was ultimately purchased by the Fenimore Art Museum in Cooperstown, New York. Today it is exhibited prominently as part of the museum's permanent collection of folk art (Sciorra 2014; Kahn 2014; Di Stefano 2015, 42-49).

Indelicato's picassiette creation raises a host of questions and issues that help us examine the role of material culture in

depicting and interpreting Italian American history and culture. For example, what information is needed to understand the motives of an object's maker? To date, there is no known documentation of Indelicato being formally interviewed about his inspirations and/or motives for creating his augmented work and the few biographical facts about him come from a 2014 interview with his granddaughter (Sciorra 2014).



Figure 1. The Fenimore Art Museum's publicity photograph of Giovanni Indelicato's (1887-1965) shoeshine kit which it acquired in 2014. Courtesy Fenimore Art Museum. Photograph by Richard Walker.

What might we have learned from a focused conversation with the artist? Given that there is no Italian precedent for Indelicato's

work in traditional folk culture, what were his influences? Now re-contextualized in a new display environment, how will his creation be made to speak in the future and what stories will it be made to tell?

We use the story of Indelicato and his decorated shoeshine kit as a starting point because they highlight a number of the central themes of this essay, including the intersection of migration and material culture, the role material culture has in shaping and delineating Italian ethnic cultures, and the place of materiality within memory work and public displays. In this article we offer a critical survey of some of the approaches to material culture studies within an Italian mobility context, with a precise focus on the history of Italians in the United States. We seek to illustrate the usefulness and ongoing relevance of studying material culture specifically from an Italian American angle, including emerging digital models for doing so. We situate our review by highlighting some of the themes within the vast field of material culture studies and suggesting directions for some possibilities still to be considered specific to Italian America.

Why Study Italian Migration through Material Culture?

A material culture approach has been applied across an array of humanistic fields. Although mostly visible within the work

of archeologists, cultural historians, art historians, folklorists, ethnographers, and anthropologists, a material culture approach has become increasingly adopted across the liberal arts, including literary studies and film studies. In each case, scholars of material culture understand their focus of study—the material objects themselves—as being broadly defined. Falling within this rubric are such things as handcrafted objects, factory-made ones, artifacts of daily life, artwork, architecture, and landscapes, as well as books, photographs, films, and other mass-produced products. In all cases, analyses unpack the relationships between individuals and physical objects and in so doing, open up a door to other disciplinary focuses, including revisionist histories highlighting marginalized communities or personal narratives offering insight into unbeknownst or little-known associations and identities.

Materiality, the actual physicality in space, can work symbolically to express human sentiments, fragilities, and strengths alike while also illuminating modes of production, political forces, and socio-cultural dynamics.⁴ Elevating the roles and relationships people and communities have to physical things also allows for a useful focus on the everyday and the vernacular, an analytical slant sometimes ignored by more conventional approaches to history and culture.⁵ For our purposes—and our interests on Italian migratory and Italian American experiences—those material connections become strategies for recovering stories otherwise not well documented

or seemingly devalued in standard migration narratives. In addition, this approach also offers new interpretive strategies to accepted Italian ethnic cultural texts and historical realities about Italian migration, Italian Americans, and the Italian diaspora generally.

Our concerns in this essay fall squarely within the realm of the everyday and the vernacular. What Antonio Gramsci might have seen as part of the subaltern's folklore is what Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett has called "the arts of everyday life" that have the potential to reveal embedded and sometimes disjointed layers of meaning:

The arts of everyday life are highly utilitarian arts: they give form to value... it's not about discovering that what we normally consider as art in museums or galleries also occurs in the everyday world... It is about the arts of living, by which I mean giving value meaningful form... But if you take my approach, which has to do with giving value form, that form may or may not be beautiful; it may or may not be virtuosic; it may or may not be an exemplar of craft. But meaningful form and value for me are at the heart of what art is (1997, 421).

In defining some of the boundaries of art, Kirshenblatt-Gimblett also notes the relevance of the underseen and undervalued within quotidian spaces; she suggests that aesthetics are brought forth in the shape, style, and use of an object. This "highly utilitarian" understanding of "arts"—which connects the everyday to an individual's actions—is a key component of our approach to material culture, which especially suits our ethnic and migration interests

so well, for it bolsters ways of knowledge outside of standard intellectual hierarchies and systems.

A material culture approach works well for migration scholars as it permits a focus on the individual through personal, intimate even, knowledge, while it emphasizes continuity between the past and the present. Migration scholars who focus on material culture often address issues such as consumerism, trauma, artistry, and play. A significant subfield in contemporary material culture work around migration overlaps with border studies and an interest in the materiality of mobility. Border studies frequently considers the material that individuals take with them, acquire, or lose along their journeys through, for instance, Central America and into the United States, across Africa and the Mediterranean to arrive in Italy or Spain, or during other land- and sea- crossings (see Basu and Coleman 2008; De León 2013; Trabert 2020; and Horsti 2019).⁶ Such approaches also call attention to the physical aspects of borders themselves “such as fences and border posts” that “are fundamental in thinking about bordering” (Horsti 2019, 3). These physical aspects help illuminate not only the process of migration itself but also the longer effects and relationship migrants and their families have to those borders well after settlement in new countries has occurred.

Migratory experiences as well as ethnic lives are thus accessible through the objects and stories connected to that culture. Material culture, along with the ideas associated with it, are transported, created, reproduced, and narrated to construct stories of individual, family, and community migrations. Objects migrate along with people and with that movement those things become reference points for narratives of displacement and loss, as well as reinvention and belonging. The items immigrants bring along or leave behind—from personal, hand-made objects to mass-produced consumer items—tell us much about their shaping of their own experiences. As we have said elsewhere, “objects have agency but it is our action – as scholars, as curators, as educators, in addition to everyday individuals – that activates them as palimpsests with layers of past, present, and future meanings” (Ruberto and Sciorra 2018, 148).

In considering the Italian American case, we know that objects take different routes in their transformation into Italian American migrant objects and that “there is no single object that marks the varied Italian American identities” (Ruberto and Sciorra 2018, 136). Items are transported from Italy to the United States (sometimes being brought to other countries first) and then on to secondary and tertiary sites (e.g., from immigrant tenement to third-generation suburban homes) often inherited to become treasured heirlooms. In addition, things are created in the United

States amidst new conditions and realities that assert meaning through design, form, and use.⁷ At the same time, objects created and purchased in the United States make their way back to Italy either through shipment or return visits. On occasion, ethnically coded things move from an original site to become showcased and enshrined in display environments such as museums. Items developed, refashioned, or otherwise involved in an Italian American ethnic community reflect or inform values, beliefs, and experiences of that community.

Scholars who focus on the Italian diaspora, and Italian America specifically, have adopted a material culture approach to consider a multitude of experiences, beliefs, and practices: from domestic life to the arts, from religion to popular, consumer culture.⁸ When applied in such ways, material culture becomes the center knot of a tightly woven narrative about the varieties of Italian American experiences. This narrative, especially with theoretical slants that emphasize the transnational and political, can highlight the ideologies that shape how particular kinds of vernacular aesthetic practices are valued or, more likely, devalued, among both hegemonic U.S. culture and the dominant perspectives within Italian American ethnic communities. Thus, a material culture approach to Italian American studies leads to a nuanced understanding of how objects have been exploited to develop and sustain public images and

memories of Italian American history and thus create master narratives about Italian American ethnicity.

Earlier works concerned with Italian American material culture are worth being aware of even though their engagement with the subject is not always the field's primary focus. For example, one of the earliest publications to deal with immigrant material culture, and in particular the changes that occurred vis-à-vis consumption, use, and display is Phyllis H. Williams's 1938 *South Italian Folkways in Europe and America*.⁹ Neither a rigorous scholarly study by today's standards nor a tightly focused examination of material culture per se, the reader though discovers snippets of Italian American material culture during the era of mass migration (1880-1924), often with the biased perspective of a middle-class white (non-Italian) American woman.¹⁰ In fact, this perspective plays out in other examples from the first decades of the twentieth century, even those who were sympathetic to and committed to the struggling conditions of many first-generation Italians (e.g., Jacob Riis's photography; Mary Ets's interpretations of the immigrant, Rosa, in her testimonial).¹¹

Such studies, at the very least, offer an opportunity for a preliminary overview of a topic and present a sampling of potential expandable points of interest. Much of the scholarship

on material culture connects with a host of various other fields of study as a way of deepening interpretation. For example, Evan Casey and Deidre Clemente note that “[t]he fusion of oral history and material culture... is particularly powerful because it tells us how people felt about their things—the objects that they made, bought, and used” (2017, 18). Such an approach that links objects with narratives of lived experiences and affecting presence is useful for our current exploration.



Figure 2. Frank Sinatra and Italian American members of “Franco’s Italian Army” wearing decorated helmets in support of Pittsburgh Steelers fullback Franco Harris, 1972. Harris was the child of an African American G.I. and his Italian war bride. Courtesy Detre Library and Archives, Heinz History Center.

Since the 1990s, a growing body of scholarship has examined Italian American material culture. For example, Margaret Hobbie compiled *Italian American Material Culture* as part of the Greenwood Press series documenting ethnicity and material culture at a time that witnessed a growing interest in both topics. Covering thirty-one states and Canadian provinces, the book is divided into three sections dealing with objects located in or as part of archives and museums; architecture, monuments, and sites; and sacred and secular festivals. Each entry contains basic institutional and contact information as well as brief descriptions of the holdings, venues, or annual events.¹²

Our essay, instead, builds on more recent scholarship, work which has also been done with a transnational, diasporic angle, creating a dialogue between the traditionally siloed fields of Italian studies and Italian American studies.¹³ This is particularly important given Italy's complex and diverse migration histories in which a staggering number of its citizens—thirty million from 1876 to 2010 (Fiore 2017, 4)—left their home to migrate elsewhere. This diaspora, among the largest ever, spread across northern Europe, Africa, the Americas, and Australia; it developed historically and is ongoing, making border-crossings of different kinds a defining characteristic of the nation-state of Italy as well as its associated cultures (e.g., Gabaccia 2000; Choate 2008; Ruberto and Sciorra, 2017a, 2017b; Ballinger 2020). For the purpose of this country-specific journal,

we focus our article on the United States, although we maintain the need to look at material culture, as well as other forms of expressive culture, not confined to national borders but instead as part of transnational networks and multidirectional flows (e.g., the houses constructed in Italy by repatriated immigrants; emigrant-sponsored World War I memorials in Italy).¹⁴

We limit and arrange our review into five, sometimes overlapping areas of Italian American material culture, embedding a synthesis of scholarship on these topics into our own analysis. These areas are expanded upon and discussed below: the home and domesticity; architecture and vernacular structures¹⁵; landscapes; statuary and public monuments; and finally, display environments and museums. We survey, rather than comprehensively review, each area. For instance, in the domestic area, we do not cover in any detail the material culture of food and its preparation. Similarly, we do not discuss the lives, works, and displays of studio-trained artists—although we make some gestures towards this in discussing the work of monument makers—working in modernist and contemporary styles. Also, while such items as books, photographs, and film fall squarely within the purview of material culture studies, we only address those cultural examples marginally if at all.

Our chosen areas of focus are not meant to be the only or last word on these topics, and we recognize some of our own blind

spots in our arrangement.¹⁶ Most prominently is the way our own categories reinforce conventions that we otherwise and elsewhere work to undermine. That is, how assumptions around race and gender get mapped on to suppositions about ethnicity and class often in conventional ways, reinforcing, for example, the historical emphasis on men's lived experiences (e.g., men's involvement in building and monument construction). In other words, our categories beg questions that we do not have easy answers to. How do we include gendered readings of public monuments beyond simply referring to the representations of gendered bodies in stone and bronze? How do we understand the politics of domesticity in analyses of the traditionally circumscribed private lives of women? While we have suggested some answers to these and related questions, we hope that this article brings attention to the possibilities that a serious look at the material culture of Italian Americans may offer.

The Home and Domesticity

Ethnicity has long been understood to be visible and practiced within domestic spaces, and more often than not, the work of women (di Leonardo 1984, 191-229; Orsi 1985, 129-149; 204-217). Everyday objects—from a coffee cup to a bureau—are invested with symbolic import that resonates beyond the utilitarian to convey and reinforce notions of self, family, and a larger collective that extends beyond the walls of a home. The home is a “material

environment [that] becomes the most powerful sign of the self” and the family group (Csikszentmihalyi and Rochberg-Halton 1987, 123). Material culture scholars are keenly attuned to investigating how mundane household objects become inculcated with value and meaning and in turn exert a psychological and sociological influence on individuals.

Italians of the great wave of migration came from a culture of scarcity and thus the range of objects they possessed were limited. Immigrants were restricted by how much they were allowed to transport in their transatlantic journeys (Tirabassi 2014, 265n26). The few objects they lugged with them in bags, suitcases, and trunks to the United States included clothing, cooking utensils, work tools, religious items, and the occasional musical instrument (Hobbie 1992, xvi; Tirabassi 2014, 60). Italian women often brought along their trousseaux consisting of embroidered towels, tablecloths, bedding, intimate apparel, and other items. For these migrating women, such hand-crafted items were understood, as Edvige Giunta and Joseph Sciorra have argued, as “beautiful objects, examples of their skill and resourcefulness [and] a potential source of wealth and an epitome of womanhood” (2014, 3). Casey and Clemente, in their study of early immigrant clothing, emphasize the multiplicity of meaning of everyday material objects. Their study, which interweaves an analysis of material culture and oral histories, recognizes the complicated role sewn garments

played: “clothing was a keepsake, a physical sensation, and a source of cultural tension between generations” (2017, 15).¹⁷ Through analysis of such intimate and domestic objects, we develop a richer understanding of the aesthetic perspectives and labor practices of women and we rethink female agency within and outside domestic spheres (see also Merish 2016, 204-206).

At the turn of the twentieth century, Italian immigrants struggled to establish and maintain a safe domestic environment in light of the overall displacement created by their movement, their economically precarious situation, and their racist reception in U.S. society. This balance was particularly challenging for those Italian immigrants who saw their time in the United States as temporary, saving enough money to return to buy property or otherwise support their families in their hometown. In this way, early Italian immigrants created transnational identities that often involved a “diasporic private or domestic sphere” with “intimacies across borders” (Baldassar and Gabaccia 2011, 2). In any era, how immigrants engender a sense of home—what Sara Ahmed et al. describe as “homing”—in a strange and estranging world involves a creative negotiation between the past place and its associated meanings and the constantly emerging new place (Ahmed et al. 2003, 8-9).¹⁸

One noteworthy source for gleaning information about the

domestic material culture of early Italian immigrants is the photography and writings of social reformer Jacob Riis. His now classic photographs—themselves examples of material culture—of immigrant living quarters in late nineteenth century New York City depict raw, squalid spaces. The few objects seen are utilitarian, those necessary for survival: cooking utensils, bundles of presumably clothes, minimal furniture. Yet, in his publication *The Children of the Poor*, Riis notes “the artistic arrangement of tallow-dips stuck in the necks of bottles about the newspaper cut of a saint on the corner shelf” found in the tenement apartments where Italians lived (Riis 1905, 12). From other sources we know that inexpensive chromolithograph prints depicting sacred personages or Italian royalty hung on the walls, along with calendars, as expressions of religious and political affiliations as well as aesthetic proclivities (Tirabassi 2014, 66-69). In addition, embroidered valances were hung on cupboard shelves and fireplace mantels, and curtains were used in doorways separating the cramped rooms of tenement apartments (Gabaccia 1984, 82-83).

As Italian families established themselves, they began to acquire additional domestic materials. Lizabeth Cohen’s seminal work on the material culture of immigrant homes, including those of Italians, shows that their choices reflected both preferences based

on rural European values and Victorian-style U.S. middle-class aesthetics (Cohen 1982, 302-303; see also Fitts 2002, 1-17). The large, plush, and highly decorated bed (much prized in places like Sicily) was the ideal in their new homes and this preference was carried over into other furnishings, such as upholstered chairs. This domestic preference was by then outdated among the U.S. middle class (but nonetheless still existed) who had moved beyond the cluttered decoration and furnishing of the Victorian home to embrace the Colonial Revival style and the Arts and Crafts Movement. As Italian (as well as other European) immigrants purchased wallpaper, drapes, carpets, and upholstered furniture to fill their homes as markers of economic success, Progressive Era reformers condemned this consumption not only as wasteful but also as contributing to a filthy and unsanitary environment (Cohen 1982, 295). Immigrant workers' rejection of the reformers' interventions in their domestic spaces and consumer goods helped reinforced emerging Italian American social values (Tirabassi 2014, 68-69).

The kitchen as the site of food preparation, display, and consumption was critical in the process of homing for early immigrants, and analysis of it is a key component of Italian ethnic material culture studies. Sicilian immigrant families in Manhattan's Little Italy during the early twentieth century repurposed the tenement kitchen into a combination *soggiorno* (living room) and

salotto (sitting room), based on coveted upper-class Italian housing models and not peasant domestic spatial configurations (Gabaccia 1984, 82-83). Simone Cinotto describes “the magic of the family table as the site where expressions of solidarity, bonds of affection, storytelling, humor, material culture, and taste have produced an original Italian American identity” (2013, 20). Consumption was very much part of the creation of the immigrant home that became increasingly pronounced as work became more secure, incomes increased, and migrant families were united and stable. The years following World War I witnessed “a feminization of migrant food consumption” (Zanoni 2018, 191-120) with the increased arrival of women migrants and family unification. Ultimately, food was vital in establishing and perpetuating the Italian American notion of what Robert Orsi called the *domus*, that is, the family and its “actual physical home” as the central focus of moral life (Orsi 1985, xx). As “the religion of Italian Americans,” the *domus* would go on to fuel the imagination in the scripting of a cultural, almost mythic, narrative (Orsi 1985, 77).

The *domus* also comprises the relationship Italian Americans had to home ownership. As a central ideal for southern Italian immigrants, home ownership was understood as “a fundamental source of autonomy, empowerment, and security” (Cinotto 2014, 9) and the means by which the family could establish and control

a space of its own. Italian Americans would, in turn, physically reshape the American-style house in the service of family in accordance with their vision and needs. Perhaps the best-known example of such a transformation is that of the finished basement. Lara Pascali's ethnographic study in New York City, Montreal, and Toronto documents how post-World War II Italian immigrants finished the basement with the private house's second kitchen, a space that would become "the social center of the home" (2011, 49). For it is there that women prepare every day and holiday meals, and the families eat, where neighbors and *paesani* gather to casually socialize, and where the mundane household chores like washing clothes and canning seasonal foods are conducted. The multiuse area is, according to Pascali, a "liberating space," one in which immigrant women "can simplify their daily routines and exercise control over their surroundings" (2011, 61).

Consumer products that are not Italian imports or Italian American-specific can also be portals for exploring ethnic identities by examining the uses and practices around those goods. Consider the role of a television in the creative formation of Martin Scorsese, a filmmaker specifically associated with an Italian American cinematic tradition. In the case of Scorsese's childhood, the consumer product of the television, as Scorsese's family used it and as Scorsese himself remembers it, became central in his later development as an ethnic filmmaker (Ruberto 2015, 63-66). In this

post-World War II era and into the white ethnic revival of the 1970s, Italian Americans began increasingly to embrace a positive group image which they affirmed, in part, by turning to “Made in Italy” imported consumer goods, from food products to clothing. In this way, a middle- and upper-class ethnic identity was cultivated and reinforced through the symbolic display of a consumer-driven style of Italian commodities (Tricarico 1989, 24-46; Cinotto 2014, 1-31; Ruberto and Sciorra 2017a, 9-10).



Figure 3. Francesca and Giuseppe Stallone in front of their annual domestic St. Joseph altar, in the Brighton Beach section of Brooklyn, circa 1948. Courtesy of Angela Valeria.

Further, religious material culture plays a significant role in

sacralizing and empowering the *domus*. Perhaps the most powerfully charged object of religious material culture is the domestic altar, the near exclusive domain of women. Kay Turner writes about the ancient tradition of the home altar, noting that this “matrifocal legacy of religious custom” is a site whereby women create visual and material “links between people, between things, and between realms” in an assemblage of relationships of the past and the present, the heavenly and the terrestrial (Turner 1999, 44, 79). Among Italian Americans, this role of women’s home altars is most dramatically seen (and studied) in the annual altars or *tavole* (tables) assembled in honor of St. Joseph, found in Sicilian American communities in California, Texas, Louisiana, and Massachusetts.¹⁹ Another similarly charged domestic religious folk art tradition, although not associated with women, is that of the *presepio*, the miniature landscapes depicting the Nativity that Sciorra calls an ephemeral “fantasyscape... enlivened by narrative and performance in the service of Christian pedagogy, autobiography, and family history, and the engendering and strengthening of community affiliation” (Sciorra 2015, 63). Within Italian American Catholic homes, the sacred is thus constituted, enacted, and interpreted by lay people through the artistic placement of and assiduous involvement with a multiplicity of objects invested with sanctified power and new meaning.

Architecture and Vernacular Structures

Italian immigrant labor contributed significantly to the building of U.S. infrastructure and in particular the construction of large-scale architecture. As Donna Gabaccia notes, “Italian men were earthmovers, masons, and hod carriers—veritable human steam shovels who built the transportation and urban infrastructures of modern capitalism” (Gabaccia 2000, 74–75). Despite this labor force, Italians immigrated too late in the development of the United States to foster appreciably influential ethnically defined architectural types and styles that would impact the larger host society in a significant way (Gabaccia 2000, 74–77; Upton 1986, 14; Hobbie 1992, 69).²⁰ And yet they left their mark on the built environment in innumerable personal and ethnically defined ways.

Once dotted across rural communities throughout the country, from Louisiana to Washington, from New York to California, Italian men built stone and brick ovens for bread baking. As far back as the 1860s, Italian miners panning for gold in the Sierra Nevada Foothills (often referred to as California’s Mother Lode region) constructed dome-shaped ovens out of local stone that were used as communal ovens (Costello 1981, 18–26). Italian railroad crews are overrepresented in the construction of rock ovens which were abandoned as the workers moved on down the line. Such was the case in Little Falls, New York, where railroad laborers built

an oven around 1891 that could hold up to one hundred loaves at a time. Today the partial ruin, with its intact walls but collapsed vault, is protected by a wood covering and a historical marker celebrating immigrant labor history (Millo 2020). A photograph taken near Anaconda, Montana depicts fourteen workers around a domed rock oven with one man holding a wood peel with a round loaf and another with a sign that reads “Questo è il nostro forno 9 Marzo 1906” (This is our oven March 9 1906) (Vegars 1991, 50).



Figure 4. The sisters, Antoinette Becce (left) and Vittoria Becce (right), flank their mother Lucia Santorsa Becce (second from right), and their aunt Antoinette Becce (second from left), as they pose before inserting raised dough into Lucia's family oven, Waterbury, Connecticut, circa 1930. Courtesy of Joanna Clapps Herman.

As families settled, especially in places like Louisiana and California, they built ovens for their domestic needs (Angelo 1939, 94-97;

Kniffen 1960, 28-29, 34; Costello 1998, 66-73). In her memoir about growing up in Waterbury, Connecticut, Joanna Clapps Herman writes about the daughters “who were raised in America but with 15th century customs” which included baking bread weekly in a large brick oven their immigrant father had constructed on family grounds (2011, 134-135). In Denver, Lena Ingram (birthname Polluconi) used her backyard oven to earn money after her husband died in a mining accident (Rudolph 2020). While Italian Americans continue to build backyard ovens, they are used for markedly different means than earlier times, as when post-World War II Italian immigrant Vincenzo Cutrone of Dyker Heights, Brooklyn, contracted fellow immigrants and masons Nicola Costabile and Biago D’Aquino in 2007 to build a brick oven with terracotta roof tiles used mainly for pizza making for large family gatherings (Cutrone 2021).

The Western United States provided early Italian immigrants with vast terrain to construct buildings of various sorts that exhibited distinctive Italian architectural traits. This immigrant vernacular architecture demonstrated an adaptability to place and social condition, a resourcefulness to accessible materials and tools, and a continuation of labor and cultural practices which value the decorative arts, community, and the expression of culture. One extant example is the Romaggi Adobe in Calaveras County,

California which was built by Giovanni Romaggi out of schist and adobe in the 1850s as his home, to which he eventually added a store and bar. Abandoned by the 1930s, the non-profit Save the Romaggi Adobe Foundation, founded in 2002, actively worked for almost twenty years to secure the property and restore this example of Gold Rush-era architecture based on Italian vernacular housing (Marvin 2012). As of this writing, the Foundations' ultimate goal of fully restoring the building and creating a Gold Country Family Museum is still not completed, making the example also a useful reminder of the challenges of preservation and storytelling of Italian American histories outside of standard institutional (often urban) spaces (Nestor 2015).²¹ Another place in the Western United States where immigrants interposed an Italian-identified architectural style is in Paradise Valley in north central Nevada, where Italians from the region of Piedmont designed and constructed buildings that Howard Wight Marshall states "stand apart in their medium of construction, their striking appearance among other buildings on the ranches, their durability and resistance to removal or alteration, and the fact that people in Paradise Valley say these old stone buildings are important" (1995, 4; see also Carter 1992, 95-111). These immigrants from Alpine valley towns in the province of Biella built storage facilities, horse barns, ranch houses, and bunkhouses out of sandstone and granite that contributed to a unique sense of place (Marshall 1995, 63-100).



Figure 5. In 1884 Joseph Cavagnaro built a stone shrine to St. Joseph for Giuseppe Ferretti in a rural area near Moccasin, California. Photograph by Laura E. Ruberto, 2020.

Religious architecture is yet another example of a unique ethnically identified mark on the built environment. Italian roadside shrines (*edicole sacre*) have been adapted to the U.S. landscape from rural to suburban areas. In 1884, Joseph Cavagnaro built a stone shrine to St. Joseph for Giuseppe Ferretti in the Mother Lode region. Throughout the northeast, contemporary Italian Americans construct shrines to the Madonna and the Catholic saints in the front yards of their private homes based on expressions of what Sciorra categorizes as “religious tenets, familial commitments and responsibilities, and ethnic associations

communicated through form, placement, and ritual behavior” (2015, 3; see also Marchi 2019, 133-142).

While Catholic clergy often relied on Italian laborers and craftsmen in the building of neighborhood churches and other subsequent ecclesiastic-driven devotional structures, Italian immigrants were known to construct freestanding chapels and other buildings beyond clerical oversight. In Williamsbridge, the Bronx, Francesco Lisanti, a baker from Basilicata, commissioned a family chapel of granite block in 1905 after an Italian priest allegedly absconded with donations collected for building a Catholic church for the Italians that area. The chapel was used by the family as well as neighbors for the sacramental rites of baptism and marriage, funerary masses, and weekly and holiday masses up until the 1960s (Sciorra 2001, 26-30). Meanwhile, in 1937, a group of Italian American men began constructing a grotto dedicated to Our Lady of Mount Carmel in the Rosebank section of Staten Island. Today, members of the lay voluntary association maintain the elaborate shrine and celebrate the Madonna's July 16 feast with an annual procession through neighborhood streets while devotees visit the shrine daily (Sciorra 2015, 121-152). These sacred spaces are a testament to immigrant building skills and an ethnically infused Catholicism.

A unique addition to the construction of both sacred spaces and

secular sites occurred during World War II at the hands of Italian prisoners of war who were housed in camps across the United States, including spaces in Hereford, Texas; Douglas, Wyoming; Chambersburg, Pennsylvania; San Luis Obispo, California; and on O'ahu, Hawaii. They collectively built altars, shrines, and chapels, some of which are still standing, such as an altar near Taunton, Massachusetts, built out of local stone. They also built secular site-specific pieces many of which are still extant, including fountains, statues, retaining walls, and murals (Ruberto 2022). These structures have come to inform and shape the American cultural landscape in lasting ways.

Italian Americans have also contributed significantly to the wonders of what John D. Dorst calls “vernacular display environments... where objects are formally organized for viewing, but largely as the result of personal, non-institutional, and non-professional agency” (1999, 120). These idiosyncratic art environments, many of them in California, have entered the canon of site-specific art environments, recognized as part of what Laura E. Ruberto has described as “Italian American expressions [that] speak to a California way of experiencing and shaping immigrant life” (2014, 110): Sabato “Sam” Rodia’s Watts Towers in Los Angeles; Baldassare Forestiere Underground Gardens in Fresno; Emanuele “Litto” Damonte’s Hubcap Ranch in Pope Valley; and Romano Gabriel’s Wooden Sculpture

Garden in Eureka. The most recent research on these sites has sought to shift discussion of their creators away from previous depictions as naïfs or crazies and toward exploring Italian American elements, histories, and philosophies of these works.²²



Figure 6. Detail from Romano Gabriel's Wooden Sculpture Garden, Eureka, California. Photograph by Laura E. Ruberto, 2017.

Landscapes

Material culture studies also considers landscapes transformed by humans—from a humble backyard garden to a large swath of an urban neighborhood—as part of its purview. As D.W. Meinig writes, “we regard all landscapes as symbolic, as expressions of cultural values, social behavior, and individual actions worked upon particular localities over a span of time...And every landscape is a code, and its study may be undertaken as a deciphering of meaning, of the cultural and social significance of ordinary but diagnostic features” (1979, 6).²³ The embodied practices of inhabiting, moving through, and engaging with these created spaces activate the built environment.

Joseph Inguanti, writing about gardens in suburban towns in Connecticut, observes that post-World War II Italian immigrants used horticultural skills learned in their respective hometowns to create “landscapes of memory,” and thus establish an “Italian American landscape” through “the grafting of Italian aesthetic and horticultural customs onto existing American residential models” (2011, 89). The multimedia venture, *The Italian Garden Project*, connects contemporary perspectives on sustainable locavore culture with the “traditional Italian American vegetable garden, preserving this heritage and demonstrating its relevance for

reconnecting to our food, our families, and the earth” (*The Italian Garden Project*). This revisionist approach to vernacular horticulture features video profiles of gardens and gardeners—the vast majority being post-World War II immigrants—and a developing online archive of individuals and their family-based practices.

The historically male recreational activity of bocce has created gendered spaces of ludic conviviality throughout the country, and the changes those spaces have experienced over the course of 130 years help illustrate shifting experiences and views of Italian Americans at leisure. Early immigrant men played on open ground occasionally using round stones when wood balls were unavailable (“An Italian Summer Resort” 1892, 762). Over the course of the twentieth century, clay bocce courts became increasingly visible as recognizable ethnic landscaped structures speaking to an interest in community, a focus on place-making, and leisure time. In the mid-1930s, Mayor Fiorello La Guardia’s administration constructed bocce courts in New York City parks in neighborhoods with considerable Italian American residents. In Philadelphia during the 1970s, the bocce court became a shared space for pre- and post-World War II Italian immigrant men from different generations who gathered to play, socialize, and communicate in a familiar setting for both older and younger Italian speakers (Mathias 1974, 22–30). By the end of the last century, Italian American women increasingly challenged the circumscribed male space of the courts

to gain access. In 2013, Nancy Coletti of Brooklyn commented on those men who resisted change: “They want to keep us in the kitchen, sewing, cooking, dressmaking. We’re too old for them to keep us pregnant. They get bossed by women at home, so they want to be macho here” (Berger 2013). And change has come in other forms as population demographics shift in once predominantly Italian American communities, including Latino and Asian American men taking up the sport alongside older Italian American men as in the case of San Francisco’s Crocker-Amazon Bocce Ball Club and at William F. Moore Park aka “Spaghetti Park” in Queens (Chiang 2016; Boo 2013). But demographic shifts have also witnessed on the one hand the adoption of the game by a younger coterie of players while on the other hand the removal of bocce courts from city parks as gentrification overwhelms areas once home to working-class immigrants and their descendants (Greenwalt 2013; Frost 2020).

Cemetery landscapes are likewise important sites of material culture where displays of ethnic expression are part of the geographies of thanatology. Immigrant mutual aid societies were occasionally responsible for purchasing and maintaining properties to establish burial sites for their members like the San Francisco Italian Cemetery (in Colma) which first opened in 1899 by the Società Italiana di Mutua Beneficenza (founded in 1858). Its

Italianate look of stone and marble chiseled burial vaults and stone pathways comes from the work of the original Italian craftspeople, including the Bocci and Fontana families, who shaped it in its early years (Fredricks 2014). In continuous use since 1910, L'Unione Italiana Cemetery in Tampa, Florida, with its photoceramic



Figure 7. Multihued mosaic tilework and photoceramic portraits of the deceased are a noted feature of tombstones at L'Unione Italiana Cemetery in Tampa, Florida. Photograph by Joseph Sciorra, 2020.

portraits of the deceased, is distinguished by the tombstones decorated with multihued mosaic tilework (Estabrook 2006, 62-63, 116-117). Hope Cemetery in Barre, Vermont, while not an ethnic-specific burial site, is renowned for the exquisite granite tombstones and statuary crafted by Italian immigrant carvers and sculptors for a once predominantly anarchist and socialist clientele (Allen 1997; Croce 2007). Inguanti's research on New York City's Calvary Cemetery, a burial ground with no specific ethnic affiliation or identity, shows that Italian Americans transform their family members' gravesites through decoration and plantings to "bring their own ethnically inflicted version of perpetual care" (2000, 24).²⁴

The transformation of larger swaths of land and the imprinting of ethnic markers has been of increasing interest to scholars of Italian American studies. Jerome Krase has written extensively on the "visual sociology of the vernacular culture of Little Italies" or what he calls "spatial semiotics" to identify and outline material spatial practices (2004, 20, 33). In a different vein, Cinotto debunks the popular myth that northern Italian immigrants created "winescapes" in California simply because of shared similarities between Italian and California ecosystems. Instead, extensive work—deforestation, digging canals, laying sewage systems, building dams—by low-waged immigrant labor transformed inferior soil

into productive vineyards and wineries (Cinotto 2012, 47-59). And in the Northeast, immigrants from the northern area of Friuli used masonry, construction, and tile working to transform the material landscape of Philadelphia's Chestnut Hill neighborhood in ways that demonstrate, according to Joan Saverino, "how the relationship between ethnicity and place is complicated, layered, emotionally laden, and intensely personal" (2010, 54). Such refashioning of landscapes aligns with other beliefs and practices as well (even those as diverse as leisure or religion). Italian Americans in Oakland, California, conveyed a sense of ethnic identity through their participation in the building of the city's Children's Fairyland in the 1950s, specifically the Pinocchio display of 1953. Such public support helped shape Italian Americans in the area as prominent members of the city at large (Ruberto 2008b). At the same time, ethnic city landscapes can also have a highly personal and faith-based rendering, as in the case of religious material culture, urban landscape, and ritual behavior in New York City, where, for Sciorra, "these expressions are vivid and creative ways in which personal devotion is publicly enacted and negotiated as long-standing and integral parts of the city's religious landscape" (Sciorra 2015, xviii).

Without a doubt, a material culture approach is also helpful in understanding the landscape of Italian American neighborhoods, so-called Little Italies, especially since so many developed from immigrant communities into tourist-friendly cityscapes.

Visible across the United States is the revitalization of these neighborhoods as tourist and commercial hubs, in which “the market reproduces ethnicity” through “the construction of commodified versions of their ethnic pasts for consumption by a variegated clientele in a landscape of consumption and heritage” (Kosta 2014, 226). For Kirshenblatt-Gimblett, the cultural production of “heritage” includes “the transvaluation of the obsolete, the mistaken, the outmoded, the dead, and the defunct... Once sites, buildings, objects, technologies, or ways of life can no longer sustain themselves as they formerly did, they ‘survive’—they are made economically viable—as representations of themselves” (1998, 149, 151). In the case of Little Italies, this transvaluation is visible repeatedly and suggests multiple ways cultural heritage gets aligned and intertwined with economic systems. Across the United States, developers and business associations have transformed former Little Italies into self-conscious and deliberate “ethnic Disneyland” (Krase 1990, 28)—San Diego’s India Street, San Jose’s Little Italy, Providence’s Federal Hill, Pittsburgh’s Bloomfield, New York City’s Little Italy—destination sites for the commodification of ethnic heritage heavily imbued with nostalgia.²⁵ Such neighborhoods’ topography is everchanging, “a performative display of memory,” as Steven Hoelscher (2003, 662) characterizes it, whereby developers, business associations, and non-profits alike (generally Italian American led) put to use artifacts coded as

Italian ethnic and imbued with nostalgia to shape neighborhood redevelopment.²⁶

Statuary and Public Monuments

Pellegrino D’Acierno suggests that Italian Americans historically valued an “eye-intensive culture of scenes and the theatricalized individual” (1999, 754). This attention to the human form is linked to sculptural models from antiquity that dominated artistic traditions in the West. Such a theatrical approach to the artistically-rendered body is further enhanced by the involvement and dominance of highly skilled Italian artists and artisans—casting in plaster and bronze and sculpting in granite and marble—working in Italy and the United States in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries who crafted small pieces for domestic display and monumental works dominating the public landscape. In the twenty-first century, this historical engagement with the artistic rendering of celebrated individuals and allegorical figures is no longer a straightforward story of accomplishment and contribution by immigrant artisans and the ethnic community at large. Italian Americans’ relationship to heroic figures raised on pedestals in commemorative spaces have become increasingly entangled in questions of history, power, and race in the United States. Statues of individuals who Italian Americans have commissioned and/or crafted, from Christopher Columbus to Confederate combatants, have been deemed unsuitable for such

glorification (see Cox, 2021 and Thompson, 2022). Subsequently what were once understood to be normative Italian American narratives of artistic accomplishment and ethnic assimilation have become more complicated stories revealing the role material culture plays in the reworking of ethnic and racial identities in an everchanging civic society (see Ruberto and Sciorra 2022).

One of the earliest craftspeople to migrate were the *figurinai* (or *figuristi*), male artisans who made inexpensive plaster cast statutes suited to working- and middle-class incomes, and thus helped popularize an appreciation for sculpture in the United States (Sensi-Isolani 1990, 99; Soria 1997, 65-75).²⁷ *Figurinai* (who hailed primarily from the area around the city of Lucca, in Tuscany) offered an eclectic mix of reproductions that included religious, political, classical, allegorical, and animal statues befitting the diverse tastes of a heterogeneous clientele. In addition, plaster casts became important sources for art students and established artists wishing to learn from copies of classical models. The fact that children, often apprentices, hawked their wares through city streets attracted the attention of the press and child welfare agencies which brought awareness to their plight and, in addition, fueled the perception of Italians as vagrants, mendicants, and a public nuisance (Sensi-Isolani 1990, 103-104). In time, workshops, often family-operated, were established throughout the East Coast,

the Midwest, and in San Francisco, which produced novelty statues and crafted detailed architectural ornamentation (Noyes 1989, 34-37; Soria 1997, 68-75; Balodimas-Bartolomei 2019), as well as such unique creations as the life-size diplodocus dinosaur models funded by Andrew Carnegie in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, around 1900 and still on display across the globe, and a WPA-sponsored Nativity scene in Hartford in 1938 (Rea 2001, 249-250; “Rossi, Vincent and Girard” n.d.).²⁸

American sculptors, creating small art pieces or monumental works, came to depend on these Italian immigrant craftspeople and artisans to execute their vision. The likes of August Saint-Gaudens and Frederic Remington used the Roman Bronze Works in New York City, established by engineer Riccardo Bertelli and sculptor Giuseppe Moretti, which introduced the lost-wax process for casting bronze to the United States, for the fine detailing the immigrant-run foundry produced (Boulton 2021, 77-84). Stone carvers and sculptors made impressive contributions to the major building projects with architectural ornaments and large-scale carving, from the six Piccirilli brothers’²⁹ gigantic marble Lincoln Memorial designed by Daniel Chester French to Luigi del Bianco’s Mount Rushmore envisioned by Gutzon Borglum (Koffler and Koffler 2006; Gladstone 2014).³⁰ As Marjorie Hunt notes in her study of the Italian artisans who worked on the National Cathedral in Washington, D.C., “stone carving bound them to the

past—to a rich tradition of craftsmanship going back generations in the families and communities—and connected them to the creation of a lasting legacy in stone” (1999, 37).³¹



Figure 8. Cast chalkware displayed at the Museum of International Folk Art, Santa Fe. Photograph by Joseph Sciorra, 2019.

This rich cultural heritage of artistry and craft informed the art of Italian American sculptors working in more modernist artistic traditions like Beniamino Bufano and Concetta Scaravaglione (Parkman 2007, 43-60; Kushner 2011, 271-283).

The Italian artistic involvement in the monument boom around the turn of the twentieth century was part of the material manifestation of uncontested ideals of bourgeois society. A number of Italian and Italian immigrant sculptors were creators of monuments to the Lost Cause of the Confederacy that promoted the false narrative of U.S. history concerning the Civil War. This revisionist ideology not only erased slavery as the cause for state secession but fueled the white supremacist policies of Jim Crow. Achille Perelli's monument to Thomas "Stonewall" Jackson (1881) in New Orleans; Gaetano Trentanove's Sterling Price Monument (1901) in Springfield, Missouri; Louis Amateis's Spirit of the Confederacy (1908) in Houston; and Leo Lentelli's Robert E. Lee monument (1922) in Charlottesville, Virginia³² are just a few Lost Cause monuments designed or executed by Italian immigrant sculptors. Pompeo Coppini may be one of the most prolific Italian American artists engaged in the glorification of the Confederate cause and military by populating the Texas landscape with works such as the Confederate Monument (1903) in Paris, Hood's Texas Brigade Monument (1910) in Austin, the Last Stand (1912) in Victoria, and the Jefferson Davis statue (1919) in Austin,

among others (Heyman 2018). Alexandra de Luise writes that “Coppini helped legitimize the practice of memorial building that in effect honored white supremacy” (2019). Thus, Italian immigrant sculptors and their works become implicated in debates regarding the preservation of artistic works and historic artifacts that served as propagandistic art at the service of white supremacist ideology.

In similar fashion, the carved and cast statues of Christopher Columbus, most of them funded, created, and donated by Italian Americans, have come under increasing scrutiny by Indigenous and anti-colonial activists. In the wake of protests following the 2020 police killing of African American George Floyd in Minneapolis, activists have toppled, and municipalities have removed, multiple public monuments to the fifteenth-century Genovese navigator and colonizer (Ruberto and Sciorra 2020b). As symbols of ethnicity born out of historical moments, such publicly displayed artworks do not remain static objects and are open to reinterpretation by members of a pluralistic society. Elsewhere we have discussed the historical roots of Italian Americans’ relationship to Columbus, which was initiated by the *prominenti*, the small group of economic, political, and culturally elite immigrants, who sought to link the established American Columbus hero with the discriminated Italian immigrants at the time while also forging a national *Italian* identity in the diaspora (Ruberto and Sciorra 2020a, 69-71). In time, their initiative

succeeded as a mythological and malleable Columbus became accepted as a particularly *Italian American* icon. After World War II, and especially leading up to the 1992 quincentenary, middle class Italian Americans commissioned and donated an astonishing number of Columbus statues and monuments to municipalities throughout the country. During this period:

the meaning of Columbus monuments and celebrations became unambiguously associated with the Americanization of European immigrants' descendants and their embrace of that privileged status together with a highly Americanized sense of Italian ethnicity. The rhetoric shifted from Columbus-as-struggling immigrant towards reinforcing symbols associating him with American patriotism and a hyphenated white ethnic pride (Ruberto and Sciorra 2020a, 72-73).

In the twenty-first century, Italian Americans' defense or reputation of Columbus monuments as physical markers of Italian ethnicity reveal how material culture serves as critical sites for interpreting and shaping identity, especially as these objects concern history, cultural politics, and perhaps most importantly whiteness.³³

Public commemorations of Italian American icons have long moved beyond Columbus and have become more visible in recent decades as possible alternatives to that problematic figure. These include sculpture, monuments, and other public sites to anonymous Italian immigrants in St. Louis (1972) and New Orleans (1995), as well as for individuals like fisherman Pietro Ferrante in

Monterey (1969), baseball player Joseph DiMaggio in San Francisco (1981), inventor Antonio Meucci in Brooklyn (1989), boxer Joey Giardello (birthname Carmine Orlando Tilelli) in Philadelphia (2011), and canonized nun Frances Xavier “Mother” Cabrini in Manhattan (2020).



Figure 9. Frank Vitale's 1990 bronze statue, *The Fisherman*, Pittsburg, CA. The inscription (not shown) reads "In memory of the Italian fishing pioneers who settled and developed early Pittsburg." Photograph by Laura E. Ruberto, 2018.

These commemorations suggest alternative ways to observe Italian American history in the public sphere that circumvent the monolithic Columbian model. In addition, memorials to working

class history and labor activism that involved Italian Americans have been erected in this century: the 1907 Monongah Mine Disaster in West Virginia (2007)³⁴, the 1911 Triangle Shirtwaist Factory Fire in New York (currently in production), and the 1912 Lawrence Textile Workers' Strike in Massachusetts (2012), among others. Despite the listing of inscribed Italian surnames in some of these memorials, these are not specifically intended as ethnic markers, nor are they necessarily read as *Italian American* by visitors; although they also may act in that way for certain individuals. These last examples also beg the question as to why certain Italian American labor and civil rights activists (e.g., Nicola Sacco and Bartolomeo Vanzetti, Pietro "Pete" Panto, Angela Bambace) have gone unheralded in bronze or stone in visible venues.³⁵ The choices Italian Americans have made concerning who to publicly commemorate or not are charged with ideological weight concerning the construction and interpretation of the historical past.

Display Environments and Museums

Everyday and specialized objects are highlighted and raised to particularly privileged status by being placed in curated display environments—not only in the expected spaces of galleries and museums, but also in other locations such as homes, social clubs, and businesses. Sometimes objects are removed from daily use to be put on display (e.g., an old Moka coffee maker or ravioli cutter)

to become a knick-knack on a shelf, while other items may be made or purchased with the intent of display (e.g., needlework, a photo frame, a banner). It was such domestic appurtenances, signifiers of immigrant culture, that caused consternation for U.S.-born children. This second-generation trepidation is articulated by author John Fante in a personal essay:

I am nervous when I bring a friend to my house; the place looks so Italian. Here hangs a picture of Victor Emmanuel, and over there is one of the cathedral of Milan, and next to it, one of St. Peter's, and on the buffet stands a wine-pitcher of medieval design; it's forever brimming, forever red and brilliant with wine (1933, 92).

In all cases, these varied exhibits highlight the way things can serve as powerful receptacles for memories, emotions, and philosophies of individual lives and collective sensibilities.

The contemporary home—whether rented apartment or privately-owned house—and its associated household objects are visible sites for conscious displays of material culture that evoke ethnically-marked affiliations, histories, and associations. These domestic display environments can be understood as amplified sites where “cherished household objects... provide tangible, enduring, and vitalized signs that can communicate the continuity of one's experiences, relationships, and values” (Csikszentmihalyi and Rochberg-Halton 1987, 224). Family-centered demonstrations of Italian American identity are evident in family photographs³⁶, postcards, souvenirs, and artwork depicting Italian sites and

landmarks,³⁷ or heirlooms like embroidered cloth and crocheted tablecloths. These objects are not merely legacies that make direct connections to ancestors, but displays of what gets saved, valued, and treasured in the vicissitudes and precariousness of life, especially for immigrants and their descendants (Csikszentmihalyi and Rochberg-Halton 1987, 83).

This was the case of 85-year-old Adele Sarno's Little Italy apartment, a space that became the focal point of a public debate around exhibiting Italian American ethnicity and economic redevelopment in Manhattan when she was evicted in order to build a twelve-story apartment building that would house the Italian American Museum (Ruberto and Sciorra 2018, 755, 767-768). Sarno's domestic displays wonderfully illustrated the interests of Italian Americans of her generation perhaps better than a curated exhibit in a structured museum: "the over-sized, tinted photograph of Sarno, age 16, poised regally as the crowned 'Queen of the San Gennaro Festa' that hung on the wood-paneled wall of her apartment, the small objects that lined her china cabinet and marbled-topped, Venetian-style coffee table" (Ruberto and Sciorra 2018, 146-147). In this way, the domestic becomes *museumfied* and inhabitants become curators and docents of their own lives and spaces. The notion of value (usually personal and familial) becomes further complicated by the contemporary practice of digital images and the scanning of family photographs

and documents. It imposes order on to digitized objects by technical means (i.e., apps and services that display images by date, location, or face recognition); digital domestic displays (i.e., digital frames that display items in random or synchronized ways); or creating social media stories and postings.

Beyond the home, vernacular displays are also mounted in the hyper-ethnic settings of semi-private social clubs and the commercial spaces of restaurants and specialized markets that document local histories while also creating often sentimental and mythic depictions of Italian Americanness. In Brooklyn's Castel del Golfo Social Club, established by post-World War II Sicilian immigrants, the storefront space operates as a rotating gallery in which the works of local artists are mounted as part of an annual *Serata Culturale* which also involves the recitation of poetry in Sicilian (Sciorra 2007; Sciorra 2011, 127-130). The displayed paintings, sculpture, and craft work often depict town landscapes or agricultural and fishing activities from an Italian remembered or imagined past as well as recording a club's activities and history. For example, numerous display cases, posters, and ephemera documenting the history of the club and of Italian Americans in Oakland's Temescal neighborhood are among the items on view in the "Isabella Room" of the Colombo Club (founded in 1920). Framed photographs of male Italian American pop icons (e.g., Sylvester Stallone in *Rocky*) flank objects depicting the *giglio* feast,

as celebrated in Nola and Brooklyn, adorn the Brooklyn Giglio Boys Club (founded in 1995) in the Williamsburg neighborhood. These clubs also function as archives to Italian American history, sometimes with surprising results. For example, someone at San Francisco's Italian Athletic Club (founded in 1917) recognized the name of (Frank) Capra on a reel in the Club's storage rooms. The result was the restoration of what is generally considered to be the director's first documentary film, *La visita dell' Incrociatore Italiano Libia a San Francisco, Calif., 6-29 Novembre 1921* (see Ruberto 2010).

In Redford, Michigan, immigrant Silvio Barile transformed his bakery/pizzeria and adjacent property into a site-specific art environment by decorating it first with collages of magazine imagery, posters, personalized signage, and subsequently crafted concrete statuary promoting the glories of Italian history and culture in didactic displays he self-consciously christened the Italian American Historical Artistic Museum (Cicala 2017, 93-116).³⁸ Pedagogy is less a concern at Mazzaro's Italian Market, in St. Petersburg, Florida, where one encounters a cornucopian array of Italian food products amidst a carnivalesque assemblage of objects signaling an ethnic identity at the service of consumption. The store's exterior walls are decorated with murals of Italian scenes (e.g. Venetian canals, Pizza Navona's fountains) and the entrance is a brick and stone façade with a series of arches,

topped by terracotta roof tiles. The commercial space's interior is a miscellany of signifying cultural references: Renaissance Italy (e.g., statue reproductions), an urban Italian American neighborhood (e.g., family photos, chalkware Catholic statues), a cinematic Made in Italy (e.g., vintage Vespa scooters), and popular culture icons ranging from Frank Sinatra to Robert De Niro. Seen as a whole, this vernacular display offers shoppers a highly commercialized version of an Italian ethnic identity of their choosing.

In addition to these vernacular domestic, social, and commercial display environments, museums and historical societies are purposely created as institutional spaces offering an official imprimatur to collect, archive, present, and interpret Italian American history and culture. Material culture is at the center of these efforts, as Melissa Marinaro, Director of the Italian American Program at the Senator John Heinz History Center in Pittsburgh, observes about its 1,000 Italian American-related objects: "When an artefact enters the museum's permanent collection... it no longer stands alone and, instead, becomes a point of reference in a much larger story" (2020, 11). We find it especially meaningful to consider the context by which material objects focusing on Italian ethnic identity and cultural heritage are collected, displayed, and narrated in these institutions. Elsewhere we have reviewed the process by which personal and community objects throughout the United States have been recontextualized into Italian American



Figure 10. The sacred and the commercial juxtaposed in one of several display environments at Mazzaro's Italian Market, St. Petersburg, Florida. Photograph by Joseph Sciorra, 2020.

museums, focusing on eight such spaces (created between 1978 and 2016) and the way they privilege “certain lived experiences

and construct authorial narratives of identity” through their displays and collections (Ruberto and Sciorra 2018, 137). In that study, we distinguished between “amateur” and “professional” museums, defined in great part by the former being community-based and the latter informed by a level of expertise from the field of museum studies.³⁹

All such ethnic museums and museum-like spaces are invested to different degrees in the “conspicuous construction” of ethnicity (Hoelscher 1998, 373) even while the collection and display practices differ wildly. Those differences—from the salvage model of Philadelphia’s History of Italian Immigration Museum to the glossy, high-tech exhibit displays of the Italian American Museum of Los Angeles—underscore a variety of factors such as funding resources and curatorial choices. At the same time, the structural and aesthetic choices in Italian American museums to different degrees “rearticulate... hegemonic narratives of struggle-and-success and ethnic assimilation... [and by and large such museums] structure a dominant history whereby Italian American ethnic lived experiences become central to the U.S. experience, often at the cost of more nuanced history attentive to issues of race, class, or gender” (Ruberto and Sciorra 2018, 146). In these ways, aesthetic practices and ideological perspectives become deeply intertwined to shape and sustain notions of Italian migration and ethnicity at these cu-

rated spaces.

Conclusion

We have offered a broad overview of some of the ways a material culture approach to Italian American studies has been and can be used to support an elaboration of the field of knowledge. Similar to Rhiannon Daniels, Anne O'Connor, and Katherine Tycz's review of Italian studies, we have attempted to detail "the permeable nature of Italian [American] studies and to investigate how material culture fits into its evolving interdisciplinarity" (2020, 154). By organizing some of the concerns of Italian American cultural history vis-à-vis material culture, we have given shape to the depth of work already being done, topics that are still evolving, as well as themes we imagine as possible direction for future work.

We are excited by the increased use of material culture across many avenues of Italian American and Italian diaspora studies. Noticeably, scholars have more and more taken a material culture studies approach to literature and cinema in Italian migration contexts. This emergent work includes close readings of literary texts through a material culture lens (e.g., Bona 2015; Merish 2016, 200-211; Caronia 2019, 208-233; Pelayo Sañudo 2020, 125-146) and unpacking film through object studies (Tamburri 2019, 70-75). Such work suggests some of the possibilities of expanding our

understanding of already-well-known cultural texts by revisiting them through object studies and thematic analyses. At the same time, these directions show us how material culture studies can be made more inclusive through specific ethnic readings.

As we complete this essay—written collaboratively from two distinct coasts and under the veil of a pandemic—we cannot help but also think about the place of digital culture and virtual worlds both in the act of writing this analysis and in the subject at hand. Especially given our interests in migration and mobility, thinking about digital or virtual movement within our scholarship on material culture is a logical next step. As Douglas Davis (and others) have noted, the work of art in the digital era is provocatively “chameleon like” (1995, 381), a point that holds true for all aspects of online culture and that suggests a need for awareness in our scholarship of how we talk about and analyze material objects found on our screens. Paolo Bartolini reminds us that “[t]he dematerialization of objects that has come about in postmodernity has introduced a different form of interaction between objects and humans... Today virtually everything in the world demands to be on display” (2016, 15). How do online exhibits or Instagram stories of material objects associated with Italian American culture create and reinforce virtual heritage? Illustrate nuances of ethnic change? Highlight historical realities? Or, even, support uncritical notions of Italian American

communities or neighborhoods?

Digital exhibits, social media platforms, and online synchronous events all point to new forms of display and distribution. They also point to how communities can function across great divides, suggesting emerging models for experiencing and making sense of material culture. The Italian American wonders that rise from those disjointed interactions and digital sparks will potentially be new ways of imagining and practicing Italian ethnicity. We see examples of these dynamic experiences already: for instance, the collaborative project between Florida Atlantic University and the John D. Calandra Italian American Institute at Queens College (City University of New York), on the Vivo-Fruttauro Collection (*itamm: Italian American Memories*, n.d.). The online project, produced by a group of graduate students, presents a cache of discarded family letters sent in 1947 between New York City and Italy that were found on a Brooklyn curbside and then transformed into an online repository.⁴⁰ Such a project opens up the possibility of narrativizing, visualizing, and analyzing Italian migrant ethnic histories in a broadly accessible approach.

These online opportunities also suggest new ways of processing the digital stuff people come in contact with online.⁴¹ Such digital works are not solely tied to what we visually experience on a pixelated screen, but also to the buried information digital objects

house and carry with them. Robert Wellington (and others) have discussed the distinction between the “digital” and the “digitized” with respect to art history as well as the critical thinking around the mobility of a digital object—not focusing so much on which objects a particular network houses or displays, but rather how does a virtual object’s metadata offer multiple levels of interpretations and uses (2020). Metadata, including elements such as public (hash-)tagging or more hidden HTML coding, offers objects the possibility to tell stories on the one hand in a more structured manner, but on the other hand in more culturally ambiguous ways. As scholars invested in the power of the material, understanding the role of information technology on processing *things* will be more and more valuable to the work we do. It is still a bit hard to grasp how these and other digital humanities questions apply to the fields of Italian American or Italian diaspora studies. And yet at the same time their relevancy is palpable to us, especially when we consider the larger ramifications for education and cultural outreach around the academic work we do.

Our work on Italian American cultural histories is tied to greater academic and activist concerns around migrants and refugees, human rights and border policing, and labor struggles and racialized practices. The objects people carry with them, the stuff of their everyday lives, the sites they build, the spaces they occupy, each and all participate in and negotiate politicized and political

aesthetics. As educators and cultural advocates, we hope our work on Italian American material culture offers tools and occasions for understanding the changing landscapes of the places we live in, illustrating how migrants' and their descendants' cultural expressions and consumer choices from both the historical and recent past are useful for better understanding the dynamics of our present and, importantly, useful suggestions for education and change for the future.

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Endnotes

1 A version of this article was published in Italian (Ruberto and Sciorra, 2021, 45-95).

2 Mazziotti Gillan (2014, 337).

3 Kilgannon (2015).

4 Given our focus on material culture studies in Italian American studies we are not focusing on reviewing foundational texts within the field of material culture studies. Here we only call attention to a few scholars' work who have inspired our perspective but who do not deal with Italian ethnic themes, e.g., Arjun Appadurai (1986), David Miller (1987), and Henry Glassie (1999).

5 Berger and Del Negro (2004) investigate the concept of *everyday life* in contemporary scholarship.

6 We see the applicability of Basu and Coleman's observations to Italian migrations and material culture: "We are ambitious in our scope insofar as we adopt an inclusive interpretation of both migrancy and materiality. We refer to 'migrant worlds' rather than 'migration' *per se*, in that we are not only concerned with the materiality of migration itself, but also with the material effects of having moved, perhaps many years earlier, to a new place, and with the inter-relatedness of the movements of people and things. In addition, we want to convey the sense that a 'world' – an often fragmented and fragile set of material and non-material assumptions and resources – can itself be made mobile, seemingly translated from one geographical location to another, even as it is transformed in the process." (2008, 1).

7 For example, Valenti Angelo's children's book, *Golden Gate*, describes an Italian immigrant fisherman adapting his boat to new materials and resources in California: "But Grandfather was not yet convinced this was the way a boat was made. Maybe this was the way in America, but not in Italy, where he had seen it done

differently. And besides, hadn't he himself built several boats for the canals in the marshes there"? (Angelo 1939, 119).

8 In 2016 the John D. Calandra Italian American Institute (Queens College, City University of New York) sponsored a conference dedicated to the theme of "Migrating Objects: Material Culture and Italian Identities."

9 The book's subtitle more clearly states its goal: *A Handbook for Social Workers, Visiting Nurses, School Teachers, and Physicians*.

10 This point of view is evident, for example, in discussions about home decorations and clothing which are framed as "competitive spending and even competitive waste" (Williams 1969, 71) rather than inventive and ethnically informed ways of giving form to value.

11 See Cosco (2003, 21-60) on Riis; see Merish (2016, 200-211) and Bona (2010, 73-94) on Rosa.

12 In the digital era this publication is more useful as a historical artifact in its own right than a means for locating Italian American material culture.

13 Bartolini describes this shift: "Materiality and material culture in the Italian context came to the fore with original insights in 2010, with the inaugural issue of the journal *Italian Studies* devoted to cultural studies. Instructively, in the introduction to the volume, the editor, Derek Duncan, wrote that, 'The third element that characterizes the essays in this issue is their commitment to understanding culture in terms of its materiality, and to focusing on the conditions of its reception, or indeed consumption, as well as its production'" (2016, 13).

14 See Bartoloni (2016) and Daniel, O'Connor, and Tycz (2020, 155-175) for a review of material culture work within Italian studies with a section devoted to Italian mobilities. See also our introductory essay (2022) to a special issue journal on the

topic of monuments, memorial, and Italian migrations for a trans-national approach to material culture.

15 We adopt the term vernacular to refer to buildings, built environments, landscapes and many other kinds of objects that can be associated with a particular community but are not part of an institutional system of training and labor practices, even if some aspects might be (e.g., learned art of needlework or iron work). Central to the term is that, as Glassie has noted, is an idea that we have “prepared it for analysis” (in Vellinga 2011, 184).

16 Bartolini reminds us that “Whatever angle one wishes to take, be it the material, the symbolic, the virtual, the psychoanalytic, the economic and political, or the phenomenological, things and objects continue to occupy us and demand our attention” (2016, 16).

17 For more on Italian immigrants’ women’s clothing see also Caratozzolo (2014, 35-56) and Sautman (2018, 143-174).

18 Ahmed, Castaña, Fortier, and Sheller describe homing as “the reclaiming and reprocessing of habits, objects, names and histories that have been uprooted—in migration, displacement or colonization” (2003, 9). See also Vanni’s application of this concept to Italian immigrant women’s relationship to and use of needlework in Australia (2014, 121-135).

19 On Sicilian American St. Joseph altars see Estes (1987, 35-43); Turner and Seriff (1987, 446-460); Manini (1992, 161-173); Primiano (2007, 113-25); Sturm and Lewis (2007); and Del Giudice (2010, 1-30).

20 By influential types we are referencing such U.S. architecture as Scandinavian log cabins, African shotgun houses, and Spanish Catholic missions.

21 We thank Kenneth Borrelli for providing updated information on the status of the initiative.

- 22 See also Scambray (2011) and Del Giudice (2014).
- 23 See also Jackson (1984).
- 24 For more on Italian American cemeteries see McGrath (1987, 107-113); Matturi (1993, 14-35); and Ruberto (2013).
- 25 For more on San Diego's Little Italy, see Fiore (1999, 89-110); Verdicchio (2003, 10-24); Ruberto (2007, 109-122).
- 26 The Italianate-tourist site in the United States, albeit always informed by an exploitation of artifacts coded as Italian or Italian American, is not always associated with immigrants or even Italian American cultural history. Some of the grander expressions of Italianness through landscape, architecture, and leisure are in such spaces as Venice Beach's canals, Las Vegas's casinos, or the Italianate-style of the Getty Museum in Los Angeles and the Hearst Castle in San Simeon, California.
- 27 This artistic migration was amazingly widespread with sellers found in all the major European cities, the Americas as well as Australia.
- 28 Thanks to Marie Corrado, archivist at Pittsburgh's Carnegie Museum of Natural History, who, at our request, uncovered some of the names of the over 85 Italian artisans who worked on the museum's displays: Serafino Agostini, Manno Fabri, and Emil Poli.
- 29 The Piccirilli brothers were Attilio, Ferruccio, Furio, Getulio, Masaniello, and Orazio.
- 30 Borglum's association with the Ku Klux Klan and white supremacy in general further complicates Mount Rushmore, which was carved out of Lakota Sioux sacred lands.
- 31 Much has been written about various immigrant carvers and sculptors, see Audenino (1996, 779-795); Ayala (1980); Sciorra and Vellon (2004); Bochicchio (2012, 70-82); and Giorio (2012, 145-168).

32 Lentelli completed the project after the original sculptor, Henry Shradly, died.

33 See our previous work on Italian Americans and Columbus (2017, 2020a, and 2020b). See, also, this crowd-sourced Google Doc, “Italian Americans Speak Out Against Columbus,” for an up-to-date list of related sources, academic and otherwise.

34 See Saverino (2022) for more on memorials crafted to commemorate the dead miners.

35 Related in sentiment and political intent are some of the 1960s Free Speech Movement commemorations in Berkeley: the Mario Savio Steps (1997) and the Berkeley Big People statue (2008, removed in 2020) (see Ruberto 2008a).

36 See Zeitlin, Kotkin, and Cutting Baker (1982, 182-192); Csikszentmihalyi and Rochberg-Halton (1987, 66-69); and Halle (1993, 87-118) for further discussion of domestic displays of family photographs.

37 See Del Negro (2004, 75-76) and Sciorra (2008b) for discussion of souvenirs and postcards from Italy, respectively, in the Italian immigrant home.

38 Barile’s museum and environs were destroyed the year after he died in 2019.

39 While that study was on a small group of museums devoted to Italian American history, we also recognize a much larger set of examples that fall within this broad museum category, including: permanent exhibit spaces devoted to Italian Americans in more general public institutions (e.g., the Italian American Program at the Senator John Heinz History Center); landmarked buildings associated with Italian American history (e.g., Socialist Labor Party Hall in Barre, Vermont), as per Ruberto and Sciorra (2017b, 128, 137).

40 In keeping with this initiative is the Immigration His-

tory Research Center's "Digitizing Immigrant Letters Project" in which epistolary correspondence mined from the center's archive housed at the University of Minnesota is made available online, including Italian migrants (<http://ihrca.umn.edu/immigrant-letters/letters/category/italian-language/>).

41 See also Wagner (2017, 72-83).