

Cultural Philanthropy Continues!

Anthony Julian Tamburri (February 02, 2009)



We still have miles to go, but the Inserras, the Coccias, and others are shortening the distance...

A few days ago, in my email box, I found an announcement of a newly endowed chair at Montclair State University, the [Theresa and Lawrence R. Inserra Endowed Chair in Italian and Italian-American Studies](#) [2]! This is wonderful news that we need to shout out loud from the rooftops for an array of reasons. However, please allow me to underscore only two of these many, which I consider most significant: (1) it tells us that there are even more people than the dozen or so I have found thus far who are willing to put their hard-earned money into the promotion and expansion of our two cultures; and, (2) this is happening at a state university where, still, a good number of Americans of Italian descent go to study, especially those who are first-generation college students.



For many of us began there, at the oft-times commuter state college/university, before moving on to something more like the mini-ivies and then on to one of the top five universities in the country. It was that state college that made it all possible, that allowed us to acclimate to that new and strange world of intellectualism, which did not necessarily surround us at home as a daily nutrient. This situation, I would submit to you, dear reader, still exists today; it is not the rare beast some might currently think it is.

Now, many are swift to underscore the negative representations and references found in a public discourse, be it journalistic, literary, or filmic. Indeed, there are those who also bemoan how some of our own Italian/American sisters and brothers represent us in their various fora. Well, as I have stated before, on this web-site and elsewhere, I shall indeed repeat myself here once more. (Is repetition truly the greater form of education?) We simply cannot just complain and write letters; for much of the responsibility lies with those of us within the Italian/American community. Until we step up—and I underscore also as a group voice—and respond, not merely react, in a proactive manner, we will continue to be mocked, ridiculed, and, metaphorically and literally, held hostage to dominant-culture public opinion.

In order to combat such bigoted ignorance—yes, not having familiarity with a culture leads to such simple-minded thinking—we need to be sure that those who follow, the younger generation, are aware of our culture, past and present. They can indeed have access to such knowledge in two ways: (1) People need to be there to impart the information necessary for such cultural awareness. This includes teachers and professors, on all levels. Such a strategy for success is twofold: (a) people need to get into the various K-12 curricula lessons on significant Italians and Italian Americans. To date, the New Jersey Italian and Italian American Heritage Commission has a wonderful plan that still needs to be implemented on a much larger level—indeed regional and national—than it is at this time; (b) professors at the college/university level need to include Italian Americana in their various courses and, especially at the graduate level, in their seminars. (2) This, in fact, leads to that second of two ways—an area where “push comes to shove,” so to speak. This is where cultural philanthropy comes into play; professorships in Italiana and Italian Americana need to be established; centers for Italian/American Studies need to be established. Both, clearly, can be done through endowments, as both the Inserras and those who preceded them have demonstrated. Endowed professorships and centers run the gamut for other United States ethnic groups, funded by individuals and/or their foundations. Very few individuals among the Italian/American community have engaged in such cultural philanthropy; as we count the number, we barely break double digits.

In dealing with Virginia representative Salvatore Laquinto’s Godfather ad of last year’s election cycle, I had closed a [blog](#) [3] by reminding us that Renaissance Italy engaged in, as they articulated in Latin, *vita contemplativa*—what we might call today intellectual meditation on the issues at hand—and *vita activa*—what we might consider today a “vivere civile,” a manner of us realizing our worth in active Italian/American citizenship. Such activity, I continued to write in the blog, involves thinking through issues (popular or not within our community), which is then combined with a philanthropy that is both behavioral (giving of our time and energies) and financial (giving of what we can afford of our means); namely, that kind of patronage in which the Medicis engaged so successfully and thus brought the Renaissance to its celebrated heights. Sitting back and lamenting only is, to be sure, worse than the objectionable actions we abhor.

As I understand it, this latest chair has what we might consider grass-roots origins, manifesting the above-mentioned practice of “vivere civile.” The idea was born out of a conversation following a lecture given by Fred Gardaphe seven years ago. Subsequent to that talk, he and Joseph Coccia, already a cultural philanthropist with both [The Joseph and Elda Coccia Institute for the Italian Experience in America](#) [4] at Montclair State University and the independent [Coccia Foundation](#) [5], had a long and animated conversation. Soon thereafter, Joseph, then chair of [UNICO National](#) [6]’s Italian Studies Chairs and Fellowships Committee (as well as being one of UNICO’s more generous benefactors, in this instance also), initiated the fundraising effort with a kick-off dinner in January 2002. Over the following six years, through this integration of individuals and chapters of the New



Jersey-based national organization that is UNICO, the rest, as we say, is history. This chair, basically, is the result of a practice in philanthropy that, as I classified it earlier, both behavioral (giving of time and energies) and financial. Coccia, Gardaphè, and the plethora of UNICO members and chapters have demonstrated what true collaboration can bring to bear. Wonderful and benefiting results in the further education of members of the next generation of all things Italian and Italian-American. We simply need more of this!

Theresa and Lawrence R. Inserra now join the select few who have given to the cultural survival and propagation of Italian and Italian/American Studies. The others, once more to repeat myself, are: Charles and Joan Alberto endowed the Charles and Joan Alberto Italian Studies Institute (Seton Hall University); Joseph M. and Geraldine C. La Motta endowed the Joseph M. and Geraldine C. La Motta Chair in Italian Studies (Seton Hall University); The Valente Family's funding of the The Valente Family Italian Studies Library (Seton Hall University) has set up a collection of Italian books second to none; the Baroness Mariuccia Zerilli-Marimò's most generous donation funds in perpetuity the Casa Italiana Zerilli-Marimò, home of the Department of Italian Studies at New York University; Joseph and Elda Coccia have endowed The above-lauded Joseph and Elda Coccia for their Institute and Foundation; George L. Graziadio endowed the George L. Graziadio Center for Italian Studies and its eponymous Chair of Italian Studies at California State University in Long Beach; Amelia V. Gallucci-Cirio endowed a chair in Italian studies and Western civilization at Fitchburg State College; and, *dulcis in fundo*, the Esposito family set up the Esposito Visiting Faculty Fellowship at the University of Massachusetts, Dartmouth.

Again, hats off to Theresa and Lawrence R. Inserra for both their largesse and, equally significant, their insight into recognizing the importance of investing in our two cultures.

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