

The New Face of the Italian Cultural Institute. Meeting Director Riccardo Viale

Letizia Airos (May 26, 2010)



I-Italy interviews Riccardo Viale, the new director of the Italian Cultural Institute. He was appointed to the prestigious position in Park Avenue just a few months ago but is already working on a number of innovative and interesting projects. "I will work on creating new bridges between Italy and the US, in particular in the scientific and economical fields"

The arrival of a new director at the [Italian Cultural Institute](#) [2] has always marked a change, highlighting the organization's varied objectives and priorities.

This distinct lack of continuity, perhaps the most difficult thing to explain to an American reader, also

reflects the considerable diversity within the Italian cultural world.

Viale has a very different background from that of his two recent predecessors. Renato Miracco and Claudio Angelini are both Neapolitans—the former an art historian and curator, the latter a journalist and a writer, former U.S. Bureau Chief for RAI. Viale instead is from Turin, a professor of Epistemology of the social sciences at Bicocca in Milan, president of the [Rosselli Foundation](#) [3], and founder of the Herbert Simon Society, which attracts economists and cognitive science scholars from all over the world. We begin our conversation by discussing the difficult task of promoting Italian culture in the U.S.

What brings a scholar with your background to the Italian Cultural Institute?

The key is to deal with certain issues that are related to economic policy, for example, by understanding the entire series of innovations that have emerged in science, including studies on the nature of cognitive behavior and the rationale for certain economic decisions.

It is a key which helps to explain why the prevailing approach to the financial crisis is linked to patterns of interpretation and forecasting that are no longer acceptable and that can further lead to major public policy risks in the field of economics.

Along these lines, we are planning a series of initiatives to review new models in economic theory that can be used to avoid another similar crisis in the future.

We get the sense that there is the need for a strong relationship with the world of scholarly research...

I will work to create connections that do not currently exist, as well as work with [ISSNAF](#) [4]. We need to help Italian researchers with good ideas find others who can appreciate them here. We need to create a bridge between Italy and the United States.

Then, in the field of epistemological issues we have set up a series of initiatives, one of which will be called “art, philosophy, and neuroscience.” The relationship between contemporary art and the viewer will be analyzed not only by looking at external economic or sociological models, but also in light of several different neuro-cognitive models.

We shall investigate how the neuro-cognitive dynamic impacts aesthetics, how it changes depending on artistic trends, and what this means at the level of market dynamics. It will deal with why contemporary art remains so strong even though in terms of neuro-cognitive models there is little impact on the level of aesthetic appreciation. This is related to the pervasive short circuit that exists between artist, gallery owner, and speculator in the contemporary art market.

What interests me is how these studies on the human mind in cognitive and neuro-cognitive terms can help to modernize and benefit a number of scientific disciplines, including the social sciences as well as aesthetics and ethics, on a practical level. For this reason, in fact, there are a growing number of disciplines such as neuro-aesthetics and neuro-ethics.

We inevitably ask how he views the differences between the Italian and American academic systems, and how he views them as the director of the ICI.

The frustration that an Italian academic feels is directly related to the potential that the American academic world offers. What an Italian comes to do as the director of a cultural institute is try to overcome the sense of powerlessness that he perceives in his professional life at home by creating relationships with universities, which should also become the model to follow in our country.

On the other hand, although the U.S. has undergone a period of crisis, it is also true that unlike other countries there is the possibility of surviving it because it has a university system that produces leaders and a body of knowledge capable of revitalizing the competitiveness of the American industrial system.



The true strength of America lies in its “knowledge economy” and this is closely connected to where knowledge is gained, and in particular the network of American academic institutions. As the director of the institute I want to create relationships within this network, which means talking to young Americans as well as Chinese and Indians. They are the future leaders, those who will work in research centers, in management, and in institutions. Communicating a certain view of Italian culture to them will help improve Italy’s image in the future.

After a few months, what are some of the difficulties you foresee?

The limitations can all be overcome and there is no need to cry over them. Even the budget constraints are often an excuse but money can be found. Although it is a difficult period, initiatives can be undertaken by finding the right partners and the right sponsors.

And you have already begun to spin your web, establishing strong relationships with American universities, institutions, museums...

The universities with which we have already opened discussions and have joined our committee of scientists in chronological order are Columbia, NYU, Princeton, Brown, Harvard, MIT, and the University of Miami. We will then go ahead with Yale in Connecticut, Georgetown in Washington, D.C., and the most important think-tanks.

We have already made contact with the [Metropolitan Opera](#) [5]. I proposed three initiatives: co-producing an exhibit of works at the [Teatro dell’Opera in Rome](#) [6] that was done in the Sixties, placing the larger ones at the Met and the smaller ones here at the Institute; working on an exhibit about the famous opera singer [Renata Tebaldi](#) [7]; and finally displaying the most interesting opera costumes made by [Sartoria Tirelli](#) [8]. The third initiative seems particularly interesting to me in the near future and we are currently assessing the space.

Is there interest on the part of Americans with respect to Italian culture?

Yes, but they want quality programs. Sometimes Italian institutes out of laziness agree to the proposals coming from Italy which becomes a sort of chain of transmission: you get something already pre-packaged and if it’s low cost then money becomes available to the Institute, but if it costs a lot then it’s denied.

So then it’s a problem of selection?

The difficulty lies in knowing how to say no to many of these proposals. I’ve already begun to receive many, for example, on contemporary art, an area in which we receive many proposals for exhibit. We decided then, as a matter of universal principle, to direct all proposals through a call for submissions which will end at the end of June and in which all Italian artists are invited to participate, especially those who are under the age of 40 and who are not yet firmly established. An independent jury made up of both Italians and Americans will select the best three and the winners will receive one month each at the Italian Cultural Institute to exhibit their work, along with a catalog, advertising, and anything else needed for promotion.

So what are the next general initiatives for the Italian Cultural Institute?

In the fall there will be a week dedicated to Italian cinema and a comparison between Italian and American films in collaboration with the Piedmont Film Commission and the [Tribeca Film Festival](#) [9], if they agree.

In terms of music, there will be Jazz Italia at [Lincoln Center](#) [10]. There’s also the exhibit on Tebaldi in September, and a series of conferences with Accademia dei Lincei. Then, since we have not yet celebrated [Noberto Bobbio](#) [11], we are organizing a program in his honor, one on ethics and war with Michael Waltzer at Princeton, and one on democracy at Brown with Prodi and Pasquino as well as other experts in the area.

We are also considering a series of conferences on scientific innovation: the first on twin-cylinder engines in which [Sergio Marchionne](#) [12] (CEO of [Fiat SpA](#) [13] and CEO of [Chrysler](#) [14]) is expected to participate, the second on an eco-friendly factory in Turin, and the third on photovoltaic energy with [Gruppo Eni](#) [15].



And there's the Foundation...

The foundation, Friends of the Italian Cultural Institute, is already in the constitution and will be ready within two months, mainly involves young people, the majority of them Americans rather than Italians. In this way the Institute can focus on what really interests the younger generation of Americans.

The foundation will also focus on fund-raising projects and then present programs that have already received funding.

Overall, I will try to create an institute that offers a 360-degree view of Italian culture and one that looks toward the network of universities on the east coast.

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