

“By Hand and By Lens”, Redefining Italian America Through Art

Roberta Cutillo (April 07, 2015)



New York University’s Casa Italiana Zerilli Marimò is hosting an exhibit titled “By Hand and by Lens”, featuring the works of ten talented Italian-American artists, all members of IAVANET (the Italian American Visual Artists Network). The show, on view through April 17, provides a great opportunity to come into contact with these artists, their varied artworks, and also their Italian-American identity, the common factor that unites and drives their work.

[The Italian American Visual Artists Network](#) [2] (IAVANET) was founded in 2007 by sculptor [Richard Laurenzi](#) [3], with the intention of bringing together artists from similar Italian-American backgrounds who could, through their art, promote a positive image of their culture, an alternative to the negative stereotypes often associated with Italian Americans.

This exhibit, held at [Casa Italiana Zerilli Marimò](#) [4], is the group’s fifth show and its largest one yet, as Laurenzi explained during its opening on March 4th, a successful event – complete with servings of Italian food and wine - , which introduced IAVANET to a community of Italian culture devotees.



The group's work encompasses a full range of expression from abstraction to representation, through the use of varied media, including: painting, sculpture, photography, design, and installation art. Some amongst its current 18 artists focus on making explicit references to Italian and Italian-American themes, like family, religiosity, and so on.

These themes are particularly present in the works displayed at the “By Hand and by Lens” exhibit, which feature portraits by ten IAVANET artists: Robert Franca, John Milisenda, Rita Passeri, Antonio Petracca, Siena Gillann Porta, Richard Laurenzi, Donald Vaccino, Peter Vaccino, Angela Valeria, and Joe Zarba.

In fact, these portraits, each in their own way and form, depict people that are somehow significant to the artists. And most, whether they are family members, friends, or the artists themselves, are Italian-American or Italian. The pieces therefore voice questions of national identity and culture.

A painting by [Donald Vaccino](#) [5], “Dario”, shows his father as a young child in traditional Italian schoolboy clothing and holding a wooden hoop, a once popular children's toy. Similarly, Rita Passeri's “Nonna Maria” and “Nonna Anna” show her two grandmothers, one a farmer plucking a chicken, the other a better dressed, more severe-looking, but equally a “classically Italian” woman.

Italian references of the sort are present throughout the exhibit, for example through the names of the people portrayed, which include typical ones like “Peppino” and “Gina” but also American ones like “Judith” and “Mackinly”.

The richness of the exhibit lies in the broad range and mixes of cultural elements present in the works. The public encounters various aspects of traditional Italian culture: familiar but nuanced by regional and class variations. The artists also incorporate American and Italian-American elements and their art echoes their own personal mixed cultural experiences.

By working together, the artists at IAVANET can share their stories and their views with each other and identify what it is they all share and what is relative to each of them as individuals. The result is an exhibit that feels extremely real and personal. The pieces have both an air of warm familiarity and one of exciting originality and uniqueness.

In the above interview Laurenzi expresses his desire for IAVANET to establish a rapport with Italian artists, to mentor emerging Italian-American artists, and to broaden the group's network in a general sense. He seems hopeful – and rightly so – that an event such as this one will help circulate their art and its different and heartfelt portrayals of Italian-American culture.

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Links

- [1] <http://108.61.128.93/files/39506iavanetcasaitalianazerilli1428458695jpg>
- [2] <http://iavaweb.blogspot.ae/>
- [3] <http://richard-laurenzi.squarespace.com/>
- [4] <http://www.casaitaliananyu.org/>
- [5] <http://www.donaldvaccino.com/index.html>