

Italy's Presence in the United States: "Not Like a Comet or TV Spot!"

Conversation with Renato Miracco (May 24, 2017)



We spoke with the cultural attaché to the Italian Embassy in Washington, DC, Renato Miracco, about the embassy's role in the cultural promotion of Italy in the United States. Our conversation revealed a highly complex and long-term strategy for establishing a stable presence in the cultural landscape of America.

The relationship between Italy and the United States has thrived thanks to a highly interconnected network of administrations, universities, research entities, cultural institutions, associations, schools, and businesses in both countries. Its success is achieved by the work of what is known as Sistema Italia, a system led by the Embassy of Italy in Washington, DC, that includes a network of ten consulates and five cultural institutes located in major US cities as well as the offices of the Italian Trade Commission, the Italian Government Tourist Board, and the Italia-America Chamber of Commerce. Under the guidance of Ambassador Armando Varricchio and his team of diplomats and experts, the embassy provides direction and coordination to this complex system. We sat down with the embassy's cultural attaché Renato Miracco to find out more about the embassy's activity,



especially its promotion of Italian culture in the capital and the US in general.

"There are many examples of successful collaborations among all the entities of Sistema Italia, as well as between those entities and a host of US institutions," says Miracco. "They run from extended, interconnected events like L'Anno della Cultura Italiana negli Stati Uniti—which was held throughout the US in 2013—to top-level lectures and conferences, notable art exhibitions, and a host of promotional activities we organize or support every year both in Washington and throughout the United States." All these initiatives show how the role of the embassy in promoting culture has evolved dramatically in the past few years. "It began almost naturally," says Miracco. "There is a clear need for coordination. Because we have such an extended diplomatic network in the US, guidance from the embassy is a necessity."

Big achievements in many sectors

It is difficult for Miracco to single out "the best" achievement. "Our initiatives touch upon so many subjects," he says. "Just one example of how this complex system works is the first edition of the Week of Italian Cuisine in the World, a new international initiative strongly supported by the Italian Government, which was launched last year. In Washington and throughout the US we organized a series of events, exhibits, lectures, and presentations on different topics, from the impact of technology on food production to the contribution of Italian food to the diffusion of Italian language and culture in the US." Each was geared towards the interests and needs of a particular public. Regarding the arts, for instance, Senior Lecturer at the National Gallery of Art David Gariff gave a fascinating lecture about the history of Italian cuisine and food that explored major Italian cookbooks from the Middle Ages to the Futurist period and beyond. "And that's not our sole collaboration with the National Gallery for the Week of Italian Cuisine," says Miracco. "We also participated in a fascinating tour of European still-life paintings, several of which are Italian, on display at the National Gallery."

And what's in the pipe for next fall's Week of Italian Cuisine?

"Many new initiatives," says Miracco, "that underscore one fundamental theme that came directly from Ambassador Armando Varricchio: the phenomenon of inter-cultural contamination that lies at the heart of the success of Italian cuisine. We'll show how our dishes and recipes are influenced by and in turn influenced the culinary traditions of France, Turkey, Germany, and the Mediterranean."

Another example is the series of lectures co-organized with the Georgetown University Italian Research Institute, like last fall's Famous Luxury Fashion Houses: A Remarkable Family History. "[The lecture] focused on a trait typical of even the most successful Italian multinational corporations," says Miracco, "they all started out as family businesses." Featured speakers at the event included Massimo Ferragamo, Chairman of Ferragamo USA Inc.; and Alex Bolen, CEO of Oscar de la Renta, LLC. Both men publically shared the two famous houses' family history, the creativity of their collection, and managerial skills that have ensured their fashion luxury brands' global success. The collaboration with the Italian Research Institute continues to cover several subjects. A more recent conversation, entitled "The Role of the Writer," was held this April and featured 2010 Nobel Laureate in Literature Mario Vargas Llosa and acclaimed Italian writer Claudio Magris, author of *Danube*. The conversation was moderated by Charlie Rose, Executive Editor of the Charlie Rose Program on PBS.

One important indication of the progress that has been made is Italy's increasingly large presence in American museums. "An increasing number of new initiatives are being conceived in Italy and carried over to the United States, and vice versa," says Miracco. "For example, several Italian artworks have been shown in the National Gallery: the Bronze Sculptures of the Hellenistic World, which came here from Palazzo Strozzi in Florence; Arcimboldo's Four Seasons (later moved to Milan), and works by Piero di Cosimo (later moved to Florence)."

An important role in fostering bilateral collaboration is played by the Memorandums of Understanding, or MoU—a series of agreements between Italy and the US Department of State



regulating several fields. One MoU recently renewed for the third time in a row regards the recovery and restitution to Italy of archaeological artifacts that were stolen, misappropriated or illegally acquired. This activity involves several investigative organizations, including the FBI and Italy's Carabinieri. The embassy is in the process of creating a book about the experience to celebrate the 15th anniversary of MoU.

But MoUs also bolster ties between Italian and American universities, research institutions, cultural centers, and even space agencies. "The work of the Italian Space Agency is most appreciated here," says Miracco. "And it is also thanks to an MoU that the embassy is able to offer internships to several Italian students who wish to come to the capital and collaborate with us."

Another challenge for the embassy and Italian institutions operating in the US is figuring out how to advance the study of Italian. "We've finally consolidated the Advanced Placement program in Italian," says a clearly satisfied Miracco, "which permits American high school students who study Italian to earn university credit. We launched it four years ago with fantastic results. There's great interest in learning the Italian language, not only among Italian Americans but among Americans in general." Medical, scientific, and university communities have also taken a lively interest in promoting the Italian language.

Furthermore, the embassy has a clear vision that teaching the language must be closely intertwined with the promotion of Italian music, film, and theatre—art forms that, to a large extent, "speak Italian." Now that renowned conductor Gianandrea Noseda will become Music Director of the National Symphony Orchestra at the Kennedy Center in Washington, DC, this interdisciplinary approach will receive a significant boost, since, according to Miracco, Maestro Noseda is very interested in collaborating on the integrated promotion of Italian language and culture.

Special focus on contemporary art

Miracco pauses to reflect on the American public's extraordinary receptiveness to Italian initiatives, especially in the field of art. Not surprisingly, the embassy has placed particular emphasis on contemporary Italian art through Artists in Residence at Villa Firenze, a series personally sponsored by Italian Ambassador to the United States Armando Varricchio and his wife Micaela. (Villa Firenze is their beautiful official residence.)

"We're planning another big event with the famous Spanu collection around the opening of Magazzino Italian Art in upstate NY at the end June," adds Miracco. "We're working on a few contemporary artists' installations both at the embassy and at the ambassador's residence. And we're inaugurating a show at Hillyer International Space, a gallery next to the Phillips Collection dedicated to international contemporary art. This is very important because it is the first time that it is hosting an event with Italian artists. And we're also organizing a show dedicated to the Venice Biennale."

Last but not least, another embassy-led effort to increase the presence of contemporary Italian artists involves making donations to American institutions to encourage more acquisitions. For example, after an exhibit of Italian abstract artist Beatrice Lazzari, some of Lazzari's works were donated to Washington's National Museum of Women in the Arts. "That," the cultural attaché says proudly, "began an era of increased attention the museum paid to Italian artists. At the same time, the Phillips Collection acquired ten other Italian artists' works to be placed in major American collections."

Team effort

These developments have been made possible by the close contact the embassy has established with different American authorities. "To reach the American public," he says, "we need to make them understand how Italians work."

As part of this effort, the embassy has been collaborating closely on the European Union Open House event this May. The annual flagship event of the European Month of Culture (EUMC), the EU Open House gives visitors a rare look inside the EU Delegation and its 28 EU Member State embassies.



This year is particularly important for the EU as it marks three important anniversaries: the 60th Anniversary of the Treaty of Rome, the 70th anniversary of the Marshall Plan, and the 65th anniversary of EU-US diplomatic relations. "This is an important occasion for the Embassy of Italy in Washington to become a true window on Italy," says Miracco, "presenting a full schedule of activities and events related to culture, sports, Made in Italy, science, history and technology." For the regular occasion, the whole Sistema Italia pitches in to present the best of Italy in every field.

Clearly the Italian embassy has a highly complex, long-term strategy for penetrating American culture. "Not," says Miracco, "like a comet or TV spot, but as a stable presence in the American cultural landscape." And not just in Washington, DC, either. "We want to make Italy's presence felt across the country," says the attaché. "It's a team effort. We rely on the collaboration of both the Italian diplomatic network and American institutions. That's why the embassy's coordinating role is so important."

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