

A Brief History of Italian Heritage and Culture Month in New York

I. I. (September 10, 2015)



More than three and one half decades of special events, concerts, exhibits, lectures, and proclamations to celebrate and to better inform New York, the largest Italian city outside Italy, and other geographic areas throughout the United States and the world, of the important legacy of Italian and Italian American culture.

New York's Italian Heritage and Culture Month will celebrate its thirty-ninth anniversary this year, 2015. The Italian Heritage and Culture Committee of New York, Inc. (IHCC-NY, Inc.) has provided more than three and one half decades of special events, concerts, exhibits, lectures, and proclamations to better inform New York, the largest Italian city outside Italy, and other geographic areas throughout the United States and the world, of the important legacy of Italian and Italian American culture and to celebrate these significant contributions.



In the spring of 1976 the Mayor of New York City Abraham Beame initiated the first “Italian Culture Week” from May 17 to 23 of that year. The idea was originally brought to the attention of Dr. Leo Bernardo, Director of the City Bureau of Foreign Languages of the Board of Education of the City of New York, and he was easily persuaded of the value and importance of the proposal, appointing Dr. Angelo Gimondo as project coordinator.

Nine years later, in 1985, the festivities moved to October, to coincide with various Columbus Day celebrations, and grew in duration to become “Italian Heritage and Culture Month.”

As the years passed, the Governor of the State of New York and the President of the United States joined in acknowledging this significant annual celebration by issuing proclamations in recognition of the heritage and culture of Italians and Italian Americans.

Dr. Gimondo (honored by the Italian Government on several occasions, including being granted the title of Gran Uff. in the Order of the Star of Solidarity) was the head of the corps of volunteers who annually coordinated the celebration of Italian heritage and culture in the five boroughs of New York.

His whole-hearted enthusiasm for the project was matched by that of Rosamaria Riccio Pietanza, then-President of the Italian Teachers Association of New York, who, together with him, assembled educators and administrators with an interest in language and culture, many of whom remain involved with the IHCC-NY, Inc.

In December 2006 Dr. Gimondo retired as founder and president of the IHCC-NY, Inc. after thirty years of outstanding leadership, leaving an important legacy that continues today. He presently serves on the board as a consultant and adviser.

In January 2007, Cav. Uff. Joseph Sciame, Vice-President for Community Relations at St. John’s University, past president of the national Order Sons of Italy in America, and an IHCC- NY, Inc. Board member for three decades, was elected President/ Chair of the Board of Directors. Under his leadership, the Board of Directors of the IHCC-NY, Inc. continues to be comprised of eminent representatives of New York’s Italian and Italian American community.

Early on, the organizers conceived of the idea to dedicate each year’s celebration to a specific theme or personality from the history and culture of Italy and Italian Americans. Each year the Board of Directors selects a new theme, commissions a poster, and publishes a Calendar of Events booklet.

The themes represent some of Italian America’s many significant leaders, concepts, and historical highlights, and a list of them is included below. In addition to its efforts to promote heritage and culture, along with the annual Da Vinci Award ceremonies conferred upon distinguished Italian and Italian Americans, the IHCC-NY, Inc. has in recent years: • sponsored a concert in Washington Square Park in honor of the 100-year anniversary of the birth of Giuseppe Garibaldi; • organized a special anniversary gathering on the occasion of the 200th birthday of Antonio Meucci, inventor of the telephone;

- mounted an international art exhibit from Palermo, Sicily, of works by Rosa Ponte Fucarino and partnered with the Institute of Classical Architecture and Classical America in the 500th Anniversary Celebration of Andrea Palladio; • supported the efforts of the Italian and Italian American community in promoting the cause of the Advanced Placement exam in Italian language in U.S. high schools; • saluted the lifetime achievements of the late Rocco Caporale, Ph.D., former Board Member; • hosted a special tribute to international playwright Dott. Cav. Mario Fratti for his play and movie Nine; • participated in the annual flag-raising ceremonies at Bowling Green, the site of the arrival of the first Italian to New York, Pietro Cesare Alberti. Commencing in 2010, the October flag-raising has been held at the “Mother Italy” statue at Hunter College, CUNY, NYC, followed by a traditional luncheon to celebrate Italian Heritage and Culture Month with the IHCC’s Board of Directors; • advocated for obtaining an official U.S. Congressional Resolution for the 150th Anniversary of the Unification of Italy;

- welcomed in 2012 an international exhibit from Florence, Italy, honoring Amerigo Vespucci (the year’s theme for Italian Heritage and Culture Month); in October 2012 a bust statue of Vespucci by



sculptor Greg Wyatt was unveiled for permanent display at the Organization of American States under the sponsorship of Ambassador Sebastiano Fulci; • celebrated Italian Heritage and Culture Month 2012 at the National Arts Club, with the participation of international singer Cristina Fontanelli; • co-sponsored in December 2012 the famed Presepio at the Staten Island campus of St. John's University with the Casa Belvedere Foundation.

The Presepio was a gift to the NY Fire Department by Italian officials of the Chamber of Commerce of Naples following the events of 9/11; and • hosted special ceremonies in March 2013 at the John D. Calandra Italian American Institute to inaugurate the "Poster Series" created by Artistic Director John Battista DeSantis in honor of 2013: Year of Italian Culture in the United States. Several weeks later Ambassador Claudio Bisogniero visited the site to view the posters during an unprecedented stop in New York City.

The IHCC-NY, Inc.'s role in concert with the Office of the Consulate General, now led by Minister Natalia Quintavalle, as well as with the American Association of Teachers of Italian and the Italian American Committee on Education, has been strengthened over the years in more collaborative ways so as to achieve common goals in education, heritage, culture, language, diplomatic respect, and a better understanding of the Italianità that is so important to the legacy bequeathed to Italian Americans by their families.

For many years the Consuls General of Italy have each fully supported the efforts of IHCC-NY, as has the Office of the Director of Istituto Italiano di Cultura di New York. Today, owing to the work of the IHCC-NY, Inc., a multitude of programs and events are organized by cultural associations, community centers, libraries, schools, and university departments of Italian in the Greater New York metropolitan area to proudly celebrate October's Italian Heritage and Culture Month. Moreover, in other places such as Illinois, Massachusetts, New Jersey, Rhode Island, Washington D.C., Wisconsin, and more, Italian Americans have followed the example of the IHCC-NY, Inc.

and enhanced activities in their respective areas for the month of October. For the year 2015, the Board of

Directors of the IHCC-NY, Inc., joining with the theme advocated in Italy, determined that it be appropriate in its role to recognize Italian and Italian Americans, by celebrating the 2015: year of Italian Creativity: Celebrating 50 Years of Science and Technology; New York World's Fair 1965 - Expo Milano 2015, acknowledging the achievements and great accomplishments of Italy and its gifts of science and technology to the world, and more specifically to the United States. In a true Italian spirit of enterprise, energy and enthusiasm, Italians and Italian Americans can be saluted and hailed in special ways.

Indeed, the legacy lives on! During the course of the year 2014-15, the Board of Directors continued its tradition at the MotherItaly --Statue with its various recognitions, and for the October 2014 Columbus Day weekend saluted Board Member Distinguished Professor Cav. Anthony Julian Tamburri, Ph.D., Dean, Calandra Institute, for his lifetime professional, ethnic and cultural achievements, while over the 2015 Mother's Day weekend, the Board recognized the work of Minister Natalia Quintavalle, Consul General of Italy to New York.

What follows is a chronological listing representing the array of themes designated throughout more than three and one half decades to celebrate the Italian Heritage and Culture Month.

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