



Calandra's Conference: Italian "Thingness" Across the World

Siân Elaine Gibby (April 08, 2016)



As one of the John D. Calandra Italian American Institute's two non-Italian American employees, and an enthusiastic champion of all things Italian American, I relish any means of entry into a better understanding of a facet of society I have come to value immensely (and love) over the four years I have worked here. And material culture is certainly an easily accessible point of contact, rich with possibility and nuance.

Some of the aspects of Italian American life in the twenty-first century that hold a lot of attraction for non-Italian Americans include things like foodways and design. For me, a huge pull in my personal interest comes from the art of the Italian/Italian American tailor.

I recently began making some of my own clothes, and learning from scratch how to sew has given me a powerful respect for the knowledge and lore of Italian tailors.

At least two of my Italian American colleagues have immigrant family members who are tailors, and another colleague herself worked for years in the garment industry before joining the Calandra Institute.



My struggles and pricked thumbs, my crooked seams and irregular hems, have engendered in me an abject admiration for the skills of these men and women of the cloth.

I now have a hopeless desire to make clothes like the handmade blouses and skirts one of my coworkers wears—lovingly fashioned, just for her, by her Italian mother.

Italian tailoring, in all its manifestations, has captured my imagination, but it is just one in an apparently endless variety of "things" that has emerged out of Italy as her citizens have moved and taken up residence across the globe.

[The Calandra Institute](#) [2]'s 2016 international conference (April 29-30) is titled "[Migrating Objects: Material Culture and Italian Identities](#) [3]."

It's a fascinating topic, for who doesn't love Italian things, no matter where they are? And when we say objects, it's understood that we can mean any number of different things: landscapes, monuments, clothing, religious ephemera, texts, archives and collections, media. The movements of these objects and non-objects parallel and sometimes speak for and absorb the movements of the people who owned or carried or discarded or cherished them.

Material culture, broadly defined, includes all objects and things modified by humans, from the hand-crafted (a crocheted doily) to a mass-produced, factory-made object (Olivetti typewriter), including the visual arts ([The Sistine Chapel](#) [4]), architecture (Fascist colonial modernism in Eritrea), and landscapes (a Little Italy). Objects circulate and are interpreted in many different spheres, whether it be domestic spaces, popular culture, sacred realms, or the world of commodities. How objects are used to communicate, store memories, and elicit narratives are the concern of this conference.

The conference's focus is on material culture in Italy, its colonies, and its diasporic communities. We're particularly interested in new approaches to material culture that draw from the social sciences and the humanities, discovering unexplored perspectives and expressions.

When we issued the call for papers for this conference, it was, in a sense, one of the widest nets we have thrown, in terms of encouraging scholarly creativity. Of course, all of our conferences spark such creative "thinking outside the box," but the parameters yielded some particularly enticing paper proposals, and we are tremendously excited about the people who will be attending and the topics they'll explore.

So, attendees of the conference (April 29-30: two entire days of concurrent sessions) can expect to hear about such wide-ranging matters as city planning in Ethiopia, art-making in POW camps in the United States, Renaissance embroidery, [Mayor Fiorello LaGuardia](#) [5]'s hat, odd objects people sent [Sacco and Vanzetti](#) [6] in jail, and the surprising significance of fig trees, among myriad others. For more information about this year's Calandra conference, "Migrating Objects: Material Culture and Italian Identities," please be in touch with us at the Institute, and we would love to see you there; the conference is free and open to the public. You can look for me: I will be the one wearing my badly fitting homemade clothes.

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