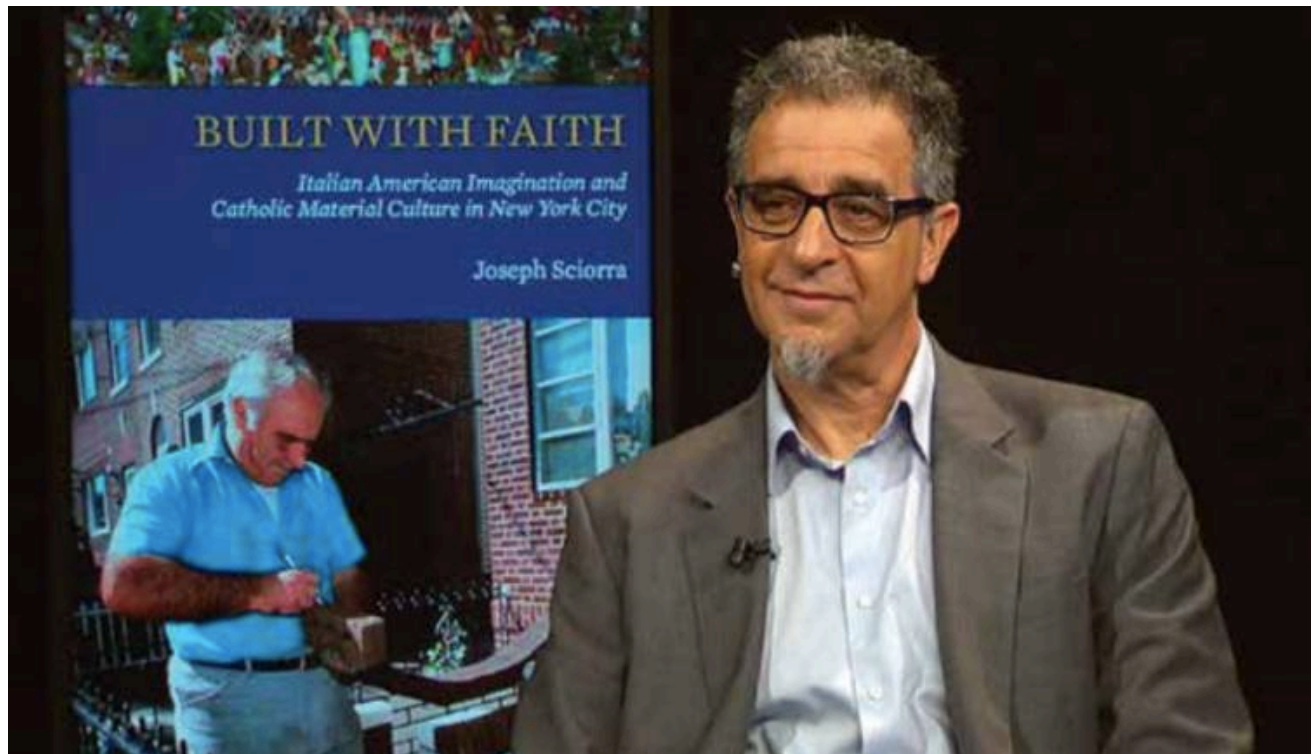


Studying Italian-American Material Culture in NYC

Fred Gardaphe (December 21, 2016)



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Joseph Sciorra, one of the few scholars in the world to take this material seriously, provides masterful insights into what most people take for granted and even more ignore. His “thick descriptions” of private shrines, presepi—[Nativity scenes](#) [2], the [Rosebank Grotto](#) [3] of Staten Island, New York, and religious processions, are all well grounded in thorough histories and journalistic accounts of these public performances of personal devotions to Catholic saints.

Through his engaging style, based on the best of [ethnographic methods](#) [4], he presents a study that reaches beyond the academic to inform and challenge us to see and react to this Italian American material culture in new ways. Sciorra’s “Introduction” recounts the work he did over a thirty-five year period in New York City and provides a rationale for the way he has documented not only the history of these acts, but how, over the years they have been “reproduced, discarded, and reinterpreted.”



Chapter One, “Private Devotions in Public Pulaces” covers the evolution of the Roman *larari*—shrines to gods found in homes, gardens and streets of ancient Rome — to their historical *le edicole* in Italy, contemporary manifestations of these can be found in “bathtub madonnas,” front stoop shrines during feste, statues and yard altars that all become what Sciorra calls “Points of Encounter, Nodes for Communication,” where people can meet and discuss their reactions to these public expressions of private devotions. Along with historical data and interpretative analyses, Sciorra presents interviews with builders and devotees and includes anecdotes from his encounters over the years.

Chapter Two, “Imagined Places and Fragile Landscapes,” covers the traditions and practice of setting up Nativity scenes, both dramatic and static, in homes and in museums from early Italian examples such as the one created by [St. Francis of Assisi](#) [5] in 1223 to the crèche set up annually in the [Metropolitan Museum](#) [6] of New York. His insights help us to see how these expressions of faith interact with contemporary life: “The presepio’s power is its subtle ability to embrace us in its miniaturized intimacy and conjure a reverie of entangled thoughts and meanings. The multiple narratives revealed there offer insight into our relationship to the past and the future, to the holy and the mundane, to the self and communal, and ultimately our longings and desires.”

If you’ve ever wondered why people decorate the outside of their homes during the Christmas season, Chapter Three presents, in great mix of academic and journalistic style, not only the history of these practices, which actually originate in Northern Europe and the U.S., but also culturally critical insights as to how these practices are rooted in conceptions of social class and taste.

In Chapter Four, Sciorra provides an in-depth study of the creation and evolution of the Our Lady of Mount Carmel Grotto in Rosebank, Staten Island. Through his study of this shrine he captures the “multivocality” of a community project through interviews with and accounts of those who were present at its creation, and those who have come along to maintain this important site of religious devotion.

Chapter Five covers the important aspects of religious feste processions and their relationships to multicultural geographic spaces and their populations in the city. Each chapter is well illustrated with clearly reproduced photos and illustrations that bring to life the impact that material culture has on spiritual developments. A concluding chapter brings all the studies together to demonstrate how past and present migrations and settlements speak to and through these public representations of personal beliefs, helping us to better understand the shifting mosaic lives in New York City.

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[4] <https://www.umanitoba.ca/faculties/arts/anthropology/courses/122/module1/methods.html>

[5] http://www.catholic.org/saints/saint.php?saint_id=50

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