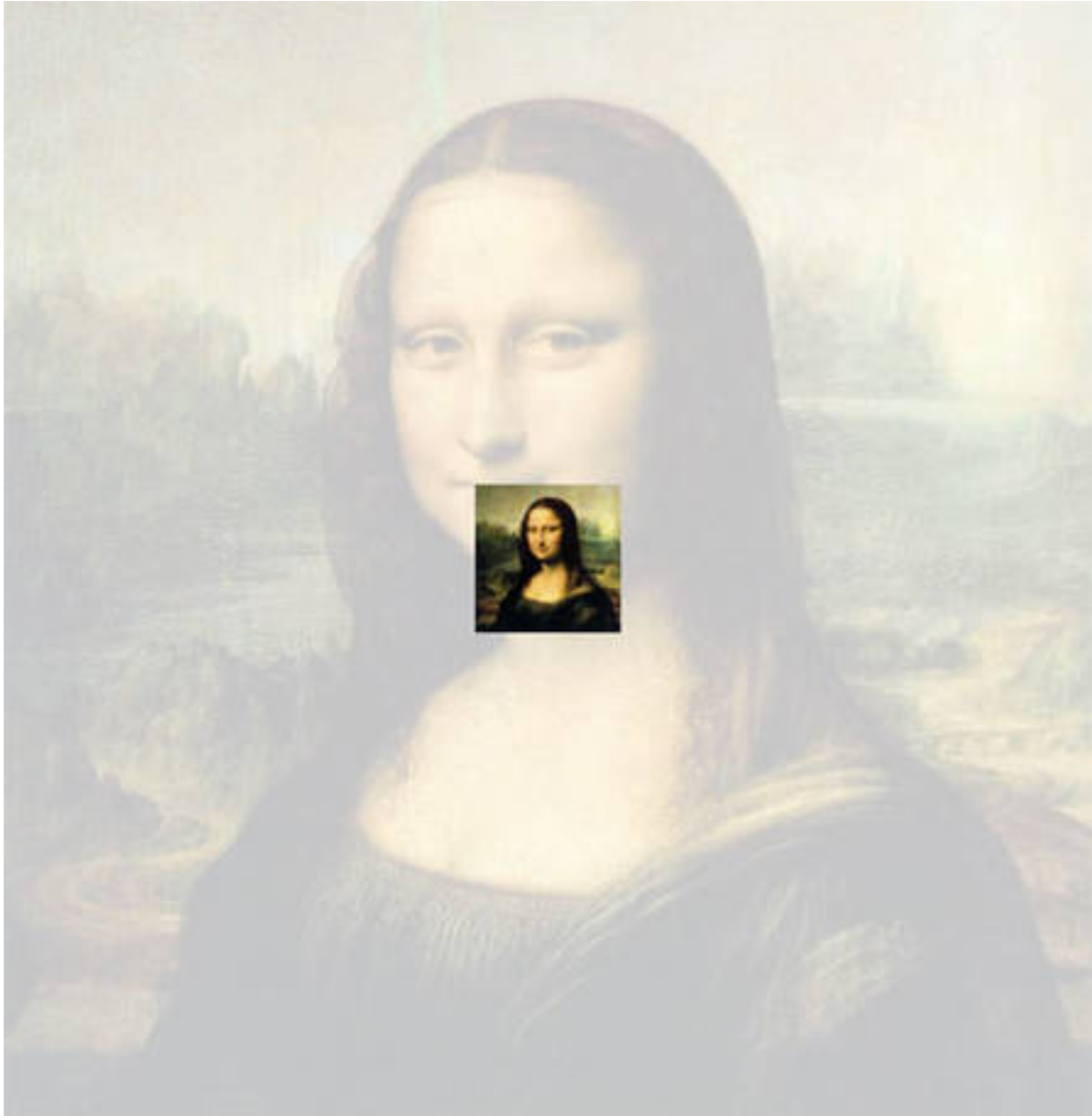




A Wake-up Call!

Anthony Julian Tamburri (April 08, 2008)



As many know by now, the future of the Advanced Placement Exam in Italian is on the chopping block after two and one-half years in existence. The language might seem a bit dramatic, but it clearly describes the current situation. Perhaps a bit more colorful and/or colloquial than one might expect, but we really need to be as transparent as we can about the critical status of the Advanced



Placement Exam in Italian and, more important, the subsequent disadvantage to those high school students who have opted for Italian over the so-called canonical languages: those languages, we've been told, that have more currency within the greater United States' collective consciousness.

On January 14, 2008, there was a meeting between an ad hoc committee in support of the AP in Italian (Matilda Raffa Cuomo, Former First Lady of the State of New York and AP Italian Committee leader; Francesco Maria Talò, Consul General of Italy in New York; Marco Mancini, First Counselor at the Embassy of Italy in Washington; Luigi De Sanctis, Director of the Education Office at the Embassy of Italy in Washington; Alfio Russo, Director of the Education Office at the Consulate General of Italy in New York; Margaret Cuomo, AP Italian committee; and myself as president of AATI) and administrative members of the College Board.

To date, there have been two iterations of the exam. In 2006 there were 1,597; in 2007 there were 1,642; and for 2008 the CB projects 1,788. There is growth, and one would normally applaud such progress. The problem is that the College Board accepted to create the AP Exam in Italian because, back when negotiations were being conducted, it was expected that there would be approximately 500 schools and 10,000 students involved in the exam. These are the numbers to assure that the exam, as the College Board explained, would not be a financial loss. Regardless, the College Board did commit to continuing the exam, even at a loss, but that the numbers of students would have to grow and financial support would have to be forthcoming. Clearly, from what you can read above, we are well under the initial estimate. There are less than 200 high schools nation-wide that offer AP courses whose students take the exam. We are, therefore, significantly lacking in the original expectations.

The upshot is that all of us, together, need to do all we can to improve the number of students taking the AP Exam in Italian. There is no question that if there are more students in high school who aspire to and take the AP Exam in Italian, there will be more students populating more advanced courses in colleges and universities. This is simple math. Let me also underscore something that Dr. Cuomo pointed out in her letter published in the latest American Association of Teachers of Italian Newsletter; that a student may indeed sit for the AP Exam in Italian without having to participate in the course. Rightfully so, as she states, "this opportunity will be most attractive to native Italian speakers, and those American students learning Italian independently."

But much more needs to be done, and the challenges are close to staggering! As it stands, the Board of Directors of the College Board has most recently decided to suspend the AP Exam in Italian after 2009 if the number of students taking the exam does not markedly improve and funds to the tune of \$6,000,000 are not raised in order to (a) guarantee the exam for another triennial (2010-2012) and (b) develop a more economical type of exam. In a letter from the College Board we were told that it "requires that if [the College Board is] to sustain AP Italian during the 2009-2010 academic year and beyond, external funding [is necessary in order to] reduce [...] annual losses to the original budget approved for AP Italian. So \$6 million in external funding will be required to: (a) cover \$1.8 million in operating costs for the current paper/pencil face-to-face scoring model for AP Italian for 2009-2010 and 2010-2011; (b) cover the conversion of the exam content into the evidence-centered model (routine updating of the exam questions): \$1.2 million; and (c) cover the development and systems build for the creation of the computer-based AP Italian Exams and the online scoring network (i.e. converting AP Italian to the same model that has allowed [the College Board] to operate Chinese and Japanese at lower volumes), launching the new model for the 2011-2012 academic year: \$3 million."

Part of the "broad-sided effect," as one of our colleagues called it, is that the AP Commissioners in Italian have been dis-invited to the May meeting in Atlanta. This meeting was to have been the final in a series begun in May 2007 in order to articulate claims, including skills-evidence-tasks and best practices, in preparation for the revision of the AP language exams. The AP Commissioners in Italian met with Commissions in French, Spanish, German, Italian, Chinese, and Japanese in order to



collaborate cross-linguistically on the articulation. As Dr. Elvira Di Fabio, College Board AP Commissioner for Italian, stated, the “implication of this action on the part of the College Board would be that the Italian AP exam is no longer on the roaster for revision.” Past president of the AATI and College Board AP Commissioner for Italian, Dr. Paolo Giordano, stated the following: “Let me add that the decision of the College Board to rescind its invitation to the Italian AP National Commissioners for the next working meeting in May is disrespectful and embarrassing, not just to the Commissioners but to all of us involved in Italian Studies.”

The above-mentioned ad hoc committee will meet later this month. At that time, members of NIAF, OSIA, UNICO will also be present, as well as other professors and teachers of Italian involved in the AP at various levels. The major discussions at that time will be dedicated to funding and short-term goals with regard to a greater diffusion of the AP Exam in Italian.

All of this inevitably speaks to an overall commitment on the part of the Italian and Italian/American communities with regard to Italian culture and its many facets. First and foremost, of course, is its language. If we do not know the language, we simply cannot access a greater part of that culture. Furthermore, for those of us who are children and grandchildren of those who spent weeks in steorage, a greater knowledge of Italian affords us greater knowledge to the hows and whys such immigration took place.

I close this piece with a few random thoughts, much of which, I am confident, many would agree. Italian culture extends beyond the realm of fashion and food; nice leather shoes and osso buco do not suffice! And to underscore the importance of Italian cultural artifacts throughout the centuries, I would remind everyone that France’s Musée du Louvre, one of that country’s most grandiose, prized possessions (one that is chock full of art from every corner of the world), is ubiquitously represented by the icon of an Italian oil painting that measures 30 × 21 inches. A big job for such a small painting!

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