

What a 'Culture Manager' Can Bring to the Table

Stefano Albertini (November 25, 2015)



Interview with Giorgio Van Straten, director of the Italian Cultural Institute in New York

Since 2015, Giorgio Van Straten has been the director of the Italian Cultural Institute on Park Avenue in New York. We've known each other for a long time, going back at least to 2000, when Giorgio won the Zerilli- Marimò Prize for Italian fiction with his memoir-novel *Il mio nome a memoria*

Giorgio Van Straten, despite his non- Italian name, is very Italian. Yes, my family has Jewish-Dutch origins. My grandfather, who worked for a transportation insurance company, was transferred to an office in Genova. And there he ended up staying. So I am a second-generation Italian.



What's the origin of your name? You spoke about this at length in [your book](#) [2].

It goes back to the French occupation of the Netherlands under Napoleon Bonaparte. Napoleon emancipated the Jews, who up until then had been discriminated against by law. He told Dutch Jews, "You need to choose last names for yourselves," since in the early 1800s, living in a very closed world, they didn't have or need last names. An ancestor of mine had to pick one, a very difficult choice indeed: it's hard enough to choose your child's first name, which only lasts a generation, while last names may last for hundreds of years!

Why "Van Straten?"

It means "From the Streets." Originally it had a double "a" (Straaten), but one "a" was dropped later for easier pronunciation in Italian. I was intrigued by this and wanted to retrace my family history beginning with this ancestor down through seven generations. Some things were already known, while others weren't, or I discovered after writing the book, when I was able to discover many more traces of relatives online, beyond traditional archival sources.

Now you are the Director of the [Italian Cultural Institute](#) [3]. I think this is the first time a "Culture Manager" was named to the post, someone experienced in managing cultural institutions. Your experience in Italy includes running prestigious cultural institutions, including the [Palazzo delle Esposizioni](#) [4], [Scuderie del Quirinale](#) [5], [Maggio Musicale Fiorentino](#) [6], and the [Consiglio di Amministrazione della RAI](#). What do you bring from these experiences to your new position in New York?

I hope that this range of experiences can indeed be my contribution. I think that a Cultural Institute shouldn't only endorse or focus on one aspect of culture over the others. If our job is to promote Italian culture, that obviously means promoting art, literature, cinema, theatre, and music. The larger issue is how to promote all of this well. First, I have the instrument, the Cultural Institute itself, which is above all a team of people with a mission, and then a building with its own physical limitations. Not all the events and programs that we have in mind can be held there. And there are some things that might best be held elsewhere, frankly... Let's take art, for instance.

If I select a big, ambitious, and well-structured art exhibition, I'll talk to the people who actually do such a thing. I'll talk to the [Metropolitan Museum of Art](#) [7], to the [Frick Collection](#) [8], to the [Museum of Modern Art](#) [9] to see if they may be interested. In my view, this is the goal of the Institute and we need to achieve it both by utilizing our own premises well and also by collaborating with other institutions that promote Italian culture in New York. We can do extraordinary things by working together, but if we all remain stuck in our own little worlds, our achievements are going to be much smaller.

It's an interesting philosophy.

Well, I'm not here for self-promotion after all! I'm of a certain age and have accomplished things in my life; I don't need to show off. But I'm not even here to promote just the Italian Cultural Institute. I am here to promote Italian culture.

Is there in your mind some aspect of our cultural heritage that we Italians haven't done enough for? I mean, is there a sector of Italian culture that has been neglected or that needs stronger international promotion?

There is an aspect of our culture that is difficult to promote, and it is the part of culture that has to do with language. You see, art and music are media that can communicate universally, while language is peculiar to a specific culture. I believe that not everything we do has to be done in English, not always—and of course not everything needs to be done in Italian either. But if I invite Italian writers to present at the Italian Cultural Institute in New York, it would be a crime to force them to do it in English, even if their English is good, because their "working tool" is the Italian



language! Language is important and Italian, although a minority language, is also a very beautiful one, and we need to use it.

Another point of discussion and often a source of controversy is the relevance that Italian-American culture has for our institutions. In the past the Italian Cultural Institute used to consider it a separate matter, not worthy of attention. [Casa Italiana](#) [10], because of the direction set down by our late founder [Baronessa Zerilli-Marimò](#) [11], has always been inclusive, open to promoting a sense of Italian culture that can include Italian-American culture. What are your thoughts?

Italian American culture belongs to both Italian and American cultures, and this is what makes it interesting. It would be a mistake however to think that the Italian-American community or the most recent communities of Italians who have immigrated to live and work here are my primary interlocutors—because our goal is to promote the Italian and Italian-American cultures among Americans at large.

I understand that this was to be a conversation, but I ended up giving you the third degree. Now, to be fair, it's your turn to ask me a question, about anything you want.

Well, here you go. If you were to offer me a piece of advice—and I think you well-suited for this, as you know this city infinitely better than I do—what would you say?

On many topics I think we see things in a very similar way. One of the goals that I've lately been trying to work on— and this could be perhaps a common objective—is to take advantage of this great interest that there is in our culture, and try to go beyond what the Americans already know about Italy. This is what I think our challenge should be. There is a whole culture in contemporary Italy, a culture that belongs to the Italians who immigrated in recent decades, but one that is not well known. There is an extraordinary culture of comics, for instance, that an American would not immediately associate with Italy. These may become areas to invest on. One of our strategies should be to take advantage of what Americans already know about Italy, those Italian things that fascinate them, and push them a little further, towards aspects of our culture that are less known and less obviously linked to their idea of Italy.

I think this is a great idea.

Thank you!

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