

Exhibition Reviews

A Woman's Journey: From Sicily to Indianapolis.

Curated by Mary Jane Teeters-Eichacker.

Indiana State Museum, Indianapolis, Indiana.

September 25, 2015–Ongoing.

In the 1890s and early 1900s in Termini Imerese (Palermo province) Sicily, Vincenza Pusateri prepared for married life by assembling for her trousseau linens made of white cotton fabric beautifully embroidered with blue, red, and white thread. The textiles, known collectively as *biancheria*, included bedding, sleepwear, and undergarments. In 1910 at the age of twenty-four, Vincenza married Nicola Bondi and left Sicily to start a new life in the United States. They settled in Indianapolis, Indiana, where Nicola had worked for several years before returning to Sicily and marrying Vincenza. Tragically, in 1921 at the age of thirty-three, she died of tuberculosis and left behind three young daughters. Almost a century later, her descendants donated most of the contents of her trousseau, which had been carefully preserved, to the Indiana State Museum. In promotional materials for the exhibit, Mary Jane Teeters-Eichacker, the museum's curator of social history, calls the items the "most significant acquisition of her career," not only because of their beauty and cultural significance but for the opportunities that the collection presents for engaging communities and educating them about material culture and immigration.

On September 25, 2015, the museum opened the exhibit *A Woman's Journey: From Sicily to Indianapolis* to showcase the acquisition. The exhibit is an important addition to the museum's Core Galleries. Flanking the exhibit are large multicolored panels of text. One panel incorporates a striking photograph of Vincenza and Nicola on their wedding day and offers basic information about Vincenza's life and her embroidered linens. The text notes that "textiles such as these are rare." The other panel acknowledges individuals and organizations that made the exhibit possible. Abundant overhead lighting illuminates the exhibit, drawing visitors into a closer examination of the central display, which features four pieces of embroidered *biancheria* and a pattern, sketched in pencil on a nightgown, illustrating the initial steps in her process. The items are nicely arranged behind glass plates with two small panels of text below to provide interpretation. (Staff will rotate the linens on display every six months over the next two and a half years to highlight the museum's acquisition.) *A Woman's Journey* also includes a four-minute video loop playing on a standard-size computer monitor. Recognizing that there are many aspects of the exhibit that deserve further commentary, I focus only on the video, the examples of Vincenza's needlework, and the relationship of this exhibit to the museum's other exhibits.

The video is well-produced and informative. The visual imagery consists primarily of still photographs from the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries and incorporates footage of the museum's staff unpacking the donated textiles. As images are displayed on the screen, the voice of a female narrator weaves together information to provide a deeper appreciation of Vincenza's life by briefly summarizing her time in Sicily, her marriage, and the tradition of building a trousseau. It explains that four

million Italians immigrated to the United States in the early 1900s, seven thousand of whom settled in Indianapolis. The video emphasizes Italian immigrants' role in selling produce in the city through a series of photographs of such vendors and grocers. The narrator explains that Nicola Bondi sold fruits and vegetables from a horse-drawn cart and that Vincenza contributed to the family's income with a stand in the Market House. The narrator briefly addresses Vincenza's death and, as the video concludes, notes that her trousseau is a "legacy that honors the collective Italian heritage of all those who crossed the Atlantic with their hope chest full of dreams." Indeed, the video provides a convincing argument for the importance of the exhibit, though the reasoning could have been more effective if the video explained the tradition and creativity involved in Vincenza's needlework.

The four embroidered items on display when I visited were a wedding sheet, a nightgown, a pillow cover, and a chemise and drawers. Most visitors will find the items intriguing, but for someone who is not familiar with embroidery, it can be difficult to appreciate the time and skill involved in making them. Teeters-Eichacker explained that the wedding sheet, which features the highly valued white-on-white embroidery, probably took Vincenza a year or more to complete. The sheet has an intricate pattern



An embroidered pillowcase by Vincenza Pusateri featuring her initials. From the collection of the Indiana State Museum and Historic Sites. Photograph by Ethan Sharp.

of flowers and birds along the top with the phrase *Buon Reposo* (good rest) embroidered in the center. The curator pointed out that Vincenza added scallop stitches along the edges of the sheet, a time-consuming embellishment. The nightgown, which is made of heavy cotton muslin, is notable for “couching” stitches where she used white and red thread on the edges to create a candy-cane effect. The pillow cover features a pattern of flowers around the initials “V.P.” and is an example of her earliest work; the chemise includes an intricate pattern of small hearts of a variety of designs. Teeters-Eichacker clarified that although Vincenza’s needlework shows extraordinary skill, it did not reach the highest level, which was found among nuns who embroidered items for the Catholic Church. She notes that Vincenza’s style has a “charming folk quality.”

The Indiana State Museum’s acquisition of the trousseau intersects with its ongoing redevelopment as a site for heritage preservation, community engagement, and education. In 2002, the museum reopened in an impressive modern building in a location convenient to out-of-town visitors on the Indiana Central Canal in Indianapolis. Visitors enter through the Grand Lobby, which provides access to three levels of galleries and other attractions, including an IMAX theater and a large café with views of the canal. The first-floor Core Galleries explore the geology and natural history of Indiana; the third floor provides spaces for temporary exhibits. The second-floor Core Galleries guide visitors through the social, political, and cultural history of the Hoosier state. *A Woman’s Journey* is situated against a wall that directs visitors from *Crossroads of America 1880–1920 to Enterprise Indiana 1920–1940*. In *Enterprise Indiana*, visitors can survey a stunning recreation of a limestone quarry that connects exhibits in the first-floor Core Galleries with exhibits in the second-floor Core Galleries.

A Woman’s Journey is an important addition to the museum precisely because it challenges influential narratives about modernization and assimilation. There is an extraordinary collection of material culture from the nineteenth and twentieth centuries on display, but no presentation where visitors can carefully examine the handiwork of one individual. By creating a space for Vincenza’s *biancheria*, the exhibit directs attention away from the innovations and changes in consumption that many of the objects in the Core Galleries index and focuses on the traditions and artistry that shaped domestic life for one group of immigrants. *A Woman’s Journey* provides evidence of one family’s successful effort to preserve a legacy from its ancestral homeland, despite the economic hardships and pressures to assimilate that immigrants and their children faced in Indiana. In this way, it inspires visitors to contemplate other ways in which immigrants and their children maintained their cultural heritage.

—ETHAN SHARP
University of Kentucky