

Sacred Emblems, Community Signs

HISTORIC FLAGS AND RELIGIOUS BANNERS FROM

ITALIAN WILLIAMSBURG, BROOKLYN



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ITALIAN WILLIAMSBURG, BROOKLYN

curator

JOSEPH SCIORRA

with essays by

PAUL S. D'AMBROSIO AND JOSEPH SCIORRA

CATALOGUE FOR AN EXHIBITION
AT CASA ITALIANA ZERILLI-MARIMÒ
NEW YORK UNIVERSITY
FEBRUARY 6–28, 2003

organized by

CASA ITALIANA ZERILLI-MARIMÒ
NEW YORK UNIVERSITY
24 WEST 12TH STREET
NEW YORK, NY 10011

JOHN D. CALANDRA ITALIAN AMERICAN INSTITUTE
QUEENS COLLEGE (CUNY)
25 WEST 43RD STREET
NEW YORK, NY 10036

color plate on first page

“SOCIETA’ M.S./SAN PAOLINO DA NOLA/
INC.” 12 SETTEMBRE 1903/BROOKLYN, N.Y./
D’ANGELO”

Blue twill background. Lettering in metal wrapped thread, with portions in metal gilt fine “straps.” Figure in cotton (or silk) satin-stitch embroidery, gold areas of eagles and vestments gilt metal-wrapped thread, laid-and-couched. Face and hands painted and appliquéd. Paste jewels appliquéd. Laurel leaves and fleur-de-lis embroidered in gilt metal-wrapped threads in padded surface satin-stitch. Berries in silver gilt metal flat strips in satin-stitch embroidery. Filament and gilt thread coils on fringe, along lower edge and top flap. Two tassels. Commercial gilt brocade border. Attached cloth ribbons.

61 x 35¹/₂, 89 x 152 CM
CIRCA 1924-1935

Maker: Alexander D’Angelo
Courtesy of the Shrine Church of Our Lady of
Mt. Carmel

IN THE PAST FEW YEARS, Casa Italiana Zerilli-Marimò and the Department of Italian Studies at New York University have devoted an ever increasing attention to the field of Italian American studies, most notably with the establishment of the Tiro a Segno Professorship in Italian American Studies, which has allowed many NYU students to get an accurate and complete understanding of who Italian Americans are and how they have perceived themselves through history.

We are particularly proud to host and co-organize this exhibit with the John D. Calandra Italian American Institute. First of all, it is a great way to show the Italian American community and the public in general that we share a vision and a commitment to a lively and multi-faceted representation of the Italian American identity and that we feel it is our responsibility to work together both as individuals and as institutions to promote a better understanding of this identity.

I am especially pleased that this important cooperative effort focuses on this exhibit of religious banners of Italian Brooklyn. These beautiful artifacts tell stories of religious devotion, national pride, and ancient crafts passed from generation to generation. The integration of Italian immigrants into the American Catholic Church has not been an easy process. They were often discriminated by other immigrant groups and some Church leaders as they were accused of contaminating Catholicism with pagan elements and idolatry. These banners carried high and proudly in the streets of Brooklyn have represented for thousands of people a statement of fidelity to their identity and their ancestral traditions. Thanks to the patient work of Joseph Sciorra, these pieces are now brought to the attention of the larger community and proposed as living-objects of study for scholars of a variety of disciplines.

Finally, I want to express my most heartfelt gratitude to Joe for his vision and hard work on this project and to all the religious and social organizations that generously accepted to lend us their treasures of art and faith for this important event in the history of Casa Italiana Zerilli-Marimò.

Stefano Albertini / Director, Casa Italiana Zerilli-Marimò / New York University

I AM GRATEFUL TO BE ABLE TO WELCOME the opening of this exhibition on behalf of the John D. Calandra Italian American Institute of Queens College/CUNY. The institute is devoted to expanding our knowledge of the Italian American experience and to making the legacy of that history and culture available to the community. We are especially pleased that this exhibit has been realized in collaboration with the Casa Italiana Zerilli-Marimò of New York University.

The beautiful banners created by Italian American religious societies that are the focus of this exhibit are expressions of the fine craftsmanship and aesthetic values that characterize the Italian artistic tradition. Moreover, they reflect the pride in local origins, the deep religious faith, and the community devotion that immigrants carried with them in the diaspora.

Dr. Joseph Sciorra, the curator of this exhibit and the Calandra Institute's associate director for academic and cultural programs, is a well-known figure in Williamsburg's Italian community. He succeeded in securing the cooperation of the local religious organizations to entrust us with their precious banners and has created the context in which we can appreciate and understand their meaning. I am certain that this exhibit will be a unique and rewarding experience for those who view it as well as for those whose lives it celebrates.

Philip V. Cannistraro / Distinguished Professor of Italian American Studies and Acting Executive Director of the John D. Calandra Italian American Institute

Religious Banners and Ceremonial Life in Italian Williamsburg, Brooklyn

JOSEPH SCIORRA

THE OLD BANNER HANGING AT THE BACK of the Our Lady of Mt. Carmel Fraternal Society's storefront clubhouse was not in the same condition as when I had last seen it sixteen years ago. Deemed too fragile to accompany the annual procession through the streets of Williamsburg, Brooklyn, it had been retired and framed behind glass. There was yet another, more permanent alteration. The banner had been cut, the top and bottom parts lopped off leaving only the image of the Virgin Mary and infant Jesus. The dangling gold fringes were gone. The identifying words "MARIA SS. DEL MT. CARMELO" that once lined the top were severed.

But yet, it was still so beautiful. The attention to detail was still evident in the varied shades of colored threads used in the Christ child's curls and the Madonna's gown and mantle. The flowered tendrils that encircle the figures in a decorative aureole was exquisitely rendered. Even stained, frayed, and cracked, such banners from Williamsburg remain works of incredible craftsmanship that encapsulate histories of religious devotion, immigration, and urban life. These banners warrant our consideration despite their ragged state.

This exhibit is something I have wanted to do since I first laid eyes on the Mt. Carmel banner in 1986.¹ With their owners' cooperation, I have assembled thirteen historic banners (also known as standards or gonfalons) and flags. Only one (figure 5) is still actively used. Six sacred personages are represented in this collection, some with multiple banners: one banner each of St. Sabino and Our Lady of Mt. Carmel; one banner and Italian flag of St. Paulinus; three banners of Our Lady of the Snows; and four of St. Cono. The Società di Maria SS. della Misericordia's standard (but not its included flag) is the only object on display that does not reference the members' spiritual patroness, Our Lady of Mercy, either with words or an image. The show is but a sampling of the richness of Italian American cultural production, ceremonial life, and religious practices in Williamsburg, and is not intended as a definitive presentation of historic and contemporary banners from the neighborhood.²

The banners were originally commissioned, ceremoniously displayed, and owned by lay

1 A model for this show was The Textile Museum of Canada's 1999 exhibition "Gather Beneath the Banner: Political and Religious Banners of the Woman's Christian Temperance Union, 1877-1932," curated by Wendy Harker and Max Allen.

2 For more information on the ceremonial religious life of the neighborhood, see Joseph Sciorra's "We Go Where the Italians Live": Religious Processions as Ethnic and Territorial Markers in a Multi-Ethnic Brooklyn Neighborhood." *The Gods of the City: Religion and the Contemporary American Urban Landscape*. Ed. Robert A. Orsi (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1999), 310-340.

religious associations devoted to a particular saint or Madonna and organized by Italian hometown (*paese*) affiliation. The Our Lady of Mt. Carmel Fraternal Society is open to all Catholics, regardless of ethnic origins. While banners were omnipresent at religious processions and street *feste* throughout the United States during the twentieth century, there exists scant literature on the craftsmanship or their use. This may be the first time there has ever been an exhibition of Italian American processional banners.

The makers and dates of manufacture for the vast majority of the exhibited banners are unknown. Alexander D'Angelo stitched his last name at the bottom of the St. Paulinus banner (figure 1), dating it sometime between 1924-1935 when he was in business for himself. The names of Fides Art Embroidery of Brooklyn and a certain Nunzio Bossi (or Boggi) were stamped on the back bottom corners of the San Cono Young Women's Association's banner (figure 5). Teresa Corvino, current president of the women's auxiliary of the San Cono di Teggiano Catholic Association, told me that De Caro & D'Angelo, Inc. made the organization's aquamarine banner ("S. Cono/Di Teggiano," No. 10) in 1972. We can assume that all but two standards date from the first half of the twentieth century.

Association members commissioned a banner for ceremonial use, in particular, the annual religious procession staged through neighborhood streets. The procession was part of the larger *festa* complex that brought together sacred and secular elements in the public arena in what was the Italian American performance mode of the twentieth century. Processional banners remain part of a repertoire of malleable religious festival objects and behaviors created in common over time arousing intense and shared emotional response. The collective experience of festive display is achieved by properly employing items such as banners, the marching brass band, fireworks (banned city-wide under the Giuliani administration), decorative lighting, the religious statue, etc. (In some Italian American communities in New York, the banner itself was the main processional icon used in lieu of a plaster or wood statue.) This local pageantry and sacred spectacle give form to collective values and meaning, a dramatic enactment of what the community imagines itself to be.³

3 For more on the Italian American *festa*, see Robert Anthony Orsi's seminal work *The Madonna of 115th Street: Faith and Community in Italian Harlem, 1850-1950* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1985).