

Banners are an example of Catholic sacramentals, material objects imbued with the power to make the divine present in the mundane world.<sup>4</sup> Priests are routinely asked to bless processional banners, thus conferring institutional sanction on them and their users. People augmented the standard by decorating it with ribbons and flowers, and pinning donations collected along the processional route to the attached strips of material. The banner's importance in everyday religious life is revealed by the historic practice of choosing "godparents" for a standard. This honorific was bestowed on the late Fannie Iannuzzi of the Società di Maria SS. della Misericordia, who kept the banner in her home during the year (figure 4). In this way, the inanimate object is personalized and made an active member of the family of believers.

The paraded banner encapsulates multiple narratives about community history and life through the different elements displayed on the embroidered cloth. The standard evokes the sacred legend of a saint's miraculous intervention or Mary's earthly apparition through a name and representative image. The naming of specific municipalities such as Fontanarosa, Nola, and Sanza recalls Italian topographies imbued with nostalgic longing and bitter memories of *la miseria*. The success and strength of these Italian Williamsburg communities, who organized themselves to provide mutual aid (the initials "M.S." found on banners stands for "*Mutuo Soccorso*"), are celebrated by the voluntary association's name and date of foundation and/or incorporation. The banners of women's auxiliaries established during the 1930s-1950s, with their use of English, mark the evolution of the once male-only and immigrant organizations. The locus of Brooklyn, New York, cited on the banners situates a vibrant religious life in its urban context and articulates a deeply felt sense of place. The banners broadcast these conflated histories, "summing up, expressing, representing for the participants in an emotionally powerful and relatively undifferentiated way" communal identities.<sup>5</sup> For Williamsburg's Italian Americans' residents, the banners stake a claim to local history.

4 Colleen McDannell, *Material Christianity: Religion and Popular Culture in America* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1995); Leonard Norman Primiano, "Postmodern Sites of Catholic Sacred Materiality." *Perspectives on American Religion and Culture*. Ed. Peter W. Williams (Malden, MA.: Blackwell Publishers, 1999), 187-202.

5 Sherry B. Ortner, "On Key Symbols," *American Anthropologist* 75 (1973), 1339.

It is no surprise then to discover that banners were present during other ceremonial occasions. Society members posed for formal group photographs with their banners, emblems of their faith, local Italian origins, and acquired communal strength in New York. In contemporary Williamsburg, society members march with their respective banners as invited guests in the processions of other organizations. Until 2000, various banners were brought together annually at the now defunct Columbus Day Parade held in the neighborhood.

Occasionally, a group of devotees and *paesani* outlast its banner's material life. A devotion's longevity occurs when the church institutionalizes a cult once maintained by a lay association, as when the Church of Our Lady of Mt. Carmel took control of the annual feast in honor of St. Paulinus of Nola. In addition, the post-World War II wave of immigration reinvigorated older, moribund *paese*-based organizations and cults established as early as the 1880s, such as those for St. Cono of Teggiano and Our Lady of Snows from Sanza. These transitions were often marked with new banners, objects that neighborhood residents acknowledge do not match the artistic integrity of those produced in the past.

But the public and communal celebrations of numerous Catholic cults have long ago ceased as devotees ceded their *paese* identities and belief in their respective saints' efficacy, and as individuals moved out of the neighborhood in the 1960s-70s. St. Onofrio, St. Costanza, Our Lady of Perpetual Help from the Sicilian town of Castellammare del Golfo, and St. Nicholas, protector of Guardiarégia in present day Molise, are no longer feted publicly in the streets of Williamsburg with marching bands and banners. The standards that once proclaimed these religious devotions are lost, maybe to reappear as curios on a flea market table or auctioned on eBay.

The historic banners that have survived and are displayed in this exhibition are rare works of religious immigrant art. This Italian Catholic artistry is our inheritance.

## The Italian American Banner Makers of New York

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ARTISTICALLY EMBROIDERED FLAGS AND BANNERS have been a familiar sight at Italian American festivals and parades for more than a century. Despite this presence in American life, scholars have paid scant attention to these distinctive art forms. Consequently, little is known about some of the most important and prominent material icons of Italian American culture.

Recent research has only begun to clarify the contributions of enterprising Italian American merchants and craftsmen who created these works and supplied them to a burgeoning market of Italian American mutual aid and religious societies. Information gleaned from New York City directories, Italian American periodicals such as *Il Progresso Italo-Americano*, and numerous extant labeled artifacts, has identified a cluster of small Italian American manufactories centered on Grand Street in lower Manhattan. Most of these businesses flourished in the 1910s and 1920s, at the confluence of two major cultural developments: the “Golden Age” of American fraternalism, when more than half the population belonged to a volunteer association, and the great migration of Italians to America.<sup>6</sup>

According to a surviving 1938 catalogue (author’s collection) from one of the most successful society goods manufacturers, De Caro & D’Angelo, Co., Inc., 1888 marked the beginning of the trade in the Italian American community. In that year, Dominic Abbate opened a manufactory on Spring Street to produce and import flags, banners, badges, medals, and buttons. This business is reported to be the first of its kind owned by an Italian American in the United States. It was also in 1888 that Frank De Caro opened a tailor shop on 34th Street, specializing in civilian and military uniforms. Abbate and De Caro formed a partnership in 1900, offering flags, banners, badges, and uniforms from their shop at 169 Grand Street. Abbate retired in 1904, leaving De Caro as the sole owner of the business.

De Caro’s advertisements tout his recognition for superior craftsmanship in the following years. He reportedly received two jewels and a letter of commendation from Queen Margherita of Savoia and the King Of Italy, Victor Emmanuel III, in 1906. De Caro

<sup>6</sup> I am grateful to the staff of The New-York Historical Society, New York, NY, where much of my city directory research was done, and to Joanne Van Vranken of the Research Library of the New York State Historical Association, Cooperstown, NY, for facilitating my research in *Il Progresso Italo-Americano*. I also owe a debt of gratitude to Peter L. Belmonte, fellow Italian American memorabilia historian and collector, for sharing information on labeled society goods. For American fraternalism, see Jason Andrew Kaufman’s *For the Common Good? American Civic Life and the Golden Age of Fraternity*. (Oxford University Press, 2002).

also claimed to have won first prize at the Paris Exposition of 1906 and the Exposition of Alaska in 1909. His business, at first named the Italo-American Flag Co., produced society goods for organizations across the country. De Caro also continued to make uniforms for mutual aid societies, veterans' groups, marching bands, and even the theatre.<sup>7</sup>

By 1915 there were many competitors for the Italian American society goods market. The New York City business directory for that year lists more than ten manufactories in lower Manhattan, including: Giovanni Adorno, Frank De Caro, the Lignante Flag Co., and Giriaco Lombardi on Grand Street; John Detta & Co., Inc., on Leonard Street; and Marino Manufacturing and Supply on South Street. In 1916 the directory also lists A.W. Harrington & Co. and Giovanni Loforte, both near De Caro on Grand Street. At this time a customer in search of society goods could walk a few short blocks on Grand Street and encounter at least seven businesses specializing in their manufacture. In 1917, the M. Di Leva Art Embroidery Co. opened around the corner on Centre Street.

The society goods trade began to consolidate in the 1920s as owners retired or went out of business. De Caro purchased the M. Di Leva Art Embroidery Co. in 1925, and J. (probably Giovanni) Adorno & Co. in 1932. By 1933 he had ten employees working at his 169-171 Grand Street shop, a modest number considering the sheer volume of goods produced by the company. It is not known precisely how much of the work was actually done in the De Caro shop, however, as an advertisement on a cellophane wrapper for a De Caro lapel ribbon (author's collection) indicates that goods were "made to order or hired out."

On August 1, 1935, De Caro merged his business with that of Alexander D'Angelo, who had taken over the shop of Giriaco Lombardi at 181 Grand Street in 1924. De Caro & D'Angelo Co., Inc. became the preeminent Italian American society goods manufacturer in New York, operating until at least 1977, according to an invoice sent to Williamsburg's San Cono di Teggiano Catholic Association on May 10<sup>th</sup> of that year. Their 1938 catalogue, which celebrated the golden anniversary of De Caro's opening his tailor shop in 1888, is a 36-page tour-de-force of goods. The company offered American flags, Italian flags, banners

<sup>7</sup> Emelise Aleandri, in her book *The Italian American Immigrant Theatre in New York City* (Charleston, SC: Arcadia, 1999), documented De Caro's manufacture of uniforms for a theatric group. I am grateful to Joseph Sciorra for bringing this information to my attention.