

of dubbed Italian-American accents (110). Furthermore, save for a very few cases in which she focuses on the transposition or substitution of particular words, Ferrari does not provide examples of the “accented” speech and dialect of the various characters, thus leaving the reader perplexed.

Because of its lack of solid, in-depth, historical and social research, this book would be difficult to assign as a text for interdisciplinary courses. Nevertheless, *Since When Is Fran Drescher Jewish?* is a timely contribution to the field of contemporary Italian media studies and provides a media-industry perspective on the translation, adaptation, and dubbing of foreign audiovisuals into the Italian national context. Ferrari’s book represents a good point of departure for anyone who desires to begin an investigation of the complexities of audiovisual translations.

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Corbino: From Rubens to Ringling.

By Janis and Richard Londraville.

Albany: State University of New York Press, 2011.

221 pages.

An artist’s life is rarely easy. Even for the best, a tenuous livelihood and elusive recognition are a common fate. The Italian-American artist Jon Corbino was more fortunate than most. Nevertheless, amid some notable achievements and successes that enabled him to sustain a lifetime career as a leading painter of his generation, he faced his share of disappointments, frustrations, and struggles. Moreover, almost sixty years after his death, he is largely forgotten. All this is captured in *Corbino: From Rubens to Ringling*, the first-ever biography of the artist, penned by Janis and Richard Londraville. On the one hand, the couple has done us all a favor by recalling and chronicling Corbino’s worthy career. On the other hand, their earnest account of Corbino’s life and work becomes at times so intensely personal and colloquial as to lack nuance and an appropriately deft balance.

Giovanni, or Jon, Corbino was born in Vittoria, Sicily (Ragusa province), on April 3, 1905. His father was an intellectually disposed, politically active anarchist who fled to Argentina and then to the United States in order to evade arrest, abandoning his nineteen-year-old pregnant wife. Adding insult to injury, Corbino’s father financed his escape by selling his wife’s dowry, a family home. Thus, Corbino and his mother were left behind in Sicily to depend for support on her parents’ largesse. Hopes for a family reunion in New York City were thwarted either by miscommunication or the continued improvidence of Corbino’s father. Traveling to the United States, mother and son were detained for two weeks at Ellis Island in December 1910 and then deported back to Sicily when Corbino’s father failed to meet them at the New York docks. It was almost another three years before mother and son successfully immigrated to the United States and reunited with Corbino’s father.

Corbino was only eight years old when he landed in the United States for the second time. Yet throughout his life he was to retain vivid memories of Sicily and his two trips to American shores, especially his sight of the earthquake-devastated port of Messina, his harrowing, tempest-tossed transatlantic crossing, and the trauma of being separated from his mother at Ellis Island. Fortunately, in dealing with the tumult and insecurity of his own life, compounded by his immigrant status in the United States and the relative poverty of his parents, Corbino had a knack for drawing. Enrolled in New York City schools, he had the opportunity to pursue an education in art that helped him tap his native talents and transcend the tough streets of New York City's Little Italy.

As a student at the elite Peter Stuyvesant High School and then the Ethical Culture School, founded by Felix Adler, Corbino often felt like "some Sicilian bandit's son on the loose" (17). But he enjoyed studying with distinguished art instructors who encouraged his considerable gifts and taught him the necessary skills to make the most of them. After graduation, Corbino continued with studies at the Art Students League, arguably the "most important art school in the United States" (22). By the age of twenty-one, Corbino was exhibiting paintings at the Art Institute of Chicago. Just a year later, in 1928, he was invited to present a one-man show of his work at Oberlin College's Allen Memorial Art Museum. What followed was a brilliant thirty-six-year career that saw his paintings acquired by such major art institutions as the Carnegie Museum of Art, the Whitney Museum of Art, and the Metropolitan Museum of Art. Images of his paintings were frequently reproduced on the cover of *Art Digest* and other leading art periodicals.

Although Corbino did not like to be identified as an Italian-American artist and resented the condescension it sometimes engendered, he was deeply indebted to his Italian heritage and, more generally, to the European baroque tradition in art. Along with Roman mythology and transmuted moments from his earlier life in Sicily, his grandfather's horses were a perennial inspiration in his paintings of rural and circus life. Attracted to the "masters of color" – Tintoretto, Titian, and Rubens – Corbino also embraced the dramatic narrative flair of Caravaggio, Delacroix, and Géricault. In such early paintings as *Stampeding Bulls* (1937), *Vigilantes* (1936), *Montana Earthquake* (1936), and *Flood Refugees* (1938), Corbino strove to capture a tense moment in which action was about to explode. The muscular fleshiness of the artist's figures, together with a use of vivid color and the deployment of strong diagonal lines, helps convey an energy and emotional intensity that are striking and memorable.

Corbino's penchant for depicting disaster scenes wrought by the vagaries of brute nature was bound to resonate in a nation still seared by recent natural and economic calamities. In 1938, *Life* magazine published a full-length feature on Corbino at his new Rockport, Massachusetts, studio, dubbing him "the Rubens of New England." Impressed by the freshness and relevance of his work, art critics further acclaimed him "the founder of the school of baroque-romanticism."

However, in the late 1940s and early 1950s Corbino shifted to religious themes and circus scenes. He also adopted a softer, lighter palette and a more surrealistic style where horses, dancers, and acrobats appear in virtual flight, never touching the ground. While critics sometimes found this new direction less "convincing" and "coherent," they were still admiring. It was only after Corbino's death from cancer on July 9, 1964, that his work and reputation truly went into deep eclipse.

Part of Corbino's appeal from the late 1930s to the late 1950s was the vibrant and accessible alternative he seemed to offer to more controversial art trends, exemplified by the abstract expressionism of Mark Rothko, Willem de Kooning, and Jackson Pollock. Corbino had only scorn for abstract expressionism, which he first dismissed as a short-lived trend and then denounced as the ruin of American art. He never understood or appreciated that, beneath its outward chaos and abandonment of traditional representational forms, abstract expressionism was a legitimate effort to reveal something profound about being and existence. Corbino refused to allow his art to be displayed in close proximity to abstract expressionist works. The fact that major American art institutions were avidly acquiring paintings by Rothko, de Kooning, and Pollock thoroughly discredited them in his eyes.

While Corbino certainly deserves to be appreciated for his vision, talent, and craft, particularly as an immigrant who made his place in a new land, he is not likely to match the stature of Edward Hopper or Thomas Hart Benton, who also opted not to go the way of abstract expressionism. Perhaps the best explanation is to be found in the frank assessment of fellow artist Will Barnet, who knew Corbino for more than three decades. Acknowledging that "there was something spectacular in Corbino . . . a fabulous voice," Barnet simultaneously observes that in using "the language of the great masters" his friend never tried "to invent a language of his own, and he should have tried, even if he had failed" (69). The Londravilles cite the vigor of Corbino's final paintings as evidence that his creative muse was not yet done with him. Nevertheless, even had he enjoyed a longer life it seems doubtful that Corbino would have accomplished what Barnet found lacking in his work.

In their biography, the Londravilles dwell a great deal on the more intimate details of Corbino's personal life. It does not make a pretty story. Corbino was married three times and had five children. Although he could be generous as a teacher and friend, his failings as a son, husband, and father were many. He held grudges and never resolved his resentment and ambivalence toward his parents and former wives. He took a wry pleasure in ridiculing his father in old age. Without any apparent provocation, Corbino once held a knife to his second wife's throat. One of his sons was hospitalized for almost a year due to polio, and Corbino never visited him. In another revealing moment, Corbino slammed a desktop down on the outstretched hand of his second-eldest son in order to teach him not to trust anyone. Perhaps exacerbated by the stress of a vocation where you are only as good as your last painting, Corbino suffered from an obsessive-compulsive personality, tinged with paranoid tendencies that left him perennially suspicious, keeping an "enemies list." All this rendered him barely fit to live with. Yet it does not necessarily make him exceptional among artists, given the proverbial artistic temperament. The Londravilles would have offered us a more useful and enduring biography if they had focused primarily on Corbino's professional career and more incidentally on his private life as it affected his art, rather than the other way around.

There are literary problems with the biography, too. Recollections of Corbino's family, friends, students, and colleagues—sometimes unattributed and often embarrassing in their frankness and haphazard informality—are awkwardly spliced into the text. The chapters are also rife with clichés and breezy, imprecise language that good editing should have averted. Not untypically, the biography's closing chapter remarks

that “Jon Corbino was never soft, and he didn’t die softly” (184). This is apparently a euphemistic reference to the night sweats, coughing fits, and convulsive spasms that beset Corbino in his last, heavily medicated days. Here, as elsewhere, the authors’ choice of phrasing borders on the glib and insensitive. Despite such flaws, which are considerable, the Londravilles’ book laudably begins to fill a gap in our record of a twentieth-century American artist who painted well, even gloriously so.

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Squeeze This! A Cultural History of the Accordion in America.

By Marion Jacobson.

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288 pages.

“With only one instrument, you can travel the world.” Thus begins Marion Jacobson’s fascinating exploration of the piano accordion’s history, diverse cultural meanings, and multifaceted musical and social roles in the United States over the last century. A chance encounter in a Lower East Side accordion store—where she was dazzled and inspired by the musical possibilities offered by the instrument—led Jacobson on a decade-long journey across the United States investigating the piano accordion’s past and present in all strata of society, a physical and metaphorical journey that has culminated in this valuable book. Throughout, the accordion is presented as a symbol of ethnic and national identity, a reflection of shared cultural values, and, simultaneously, a way for diverse groups of people to engage in dialog with audiences and fellow musicians across the nation, whether they use the instrument to perform polkas, tarantellas, Bach, or rock.

New York City, itself a microcosm of U.S. society, is Jacobson’s home base and constant point of reference; she holds a Ph.D. in ethnomusicology from New York University (where this project began as a doctoral dissertation) and frequently performs in the city. From this starting point, the book takes the reader on a remarkable tour of accordion communities from San Francisco to Houston to the Midwest. Jacobson’s conversational style, wide-ranging subject, and wealth of ethnographic analysis make the book appealing and engaging for scholars and casual readers alike; fans of *They Might Be Giants* and Balkan-music aficionados will find as much relevant and thought-provoking material as will those who grew up watching the *Lawrence Welk Show* or singing along to Valtaro songs in New York’s Italian neighborhoods. A scholarly audience will be particularly interested in her methods and successful application of a wide range of theoretical material to her ethnographically diverse and geographically scattered subjects.

Readers of Italian descent will no doubt be aware of their community’s contributions to the worldwide accordion industry, both as manufacturers and as virtuoso performers. Jacobson’s study will be of particular interest to this audience for both