

Digital Media Review

Italian-American Traditions: Family and Community.

<http://www2.hsp.org/exhibits/Balch%20exhibits/italian/italian.html>

(accessed periodically from October 13, 2011, to May 14, 2012)

The recently redesigned website of the Historical Society of Pennsylvania (HSP) features a link to the cover page of the exhibit *Italian-American Traditions: Family and Community*. However, the link to the exhibition itself is broken. (You can reach the landing page at both <http://hsp.org/history-online/exhibits/italian-american-traditions> and www.hsp.org/node/2838.)

Although the exhibit is not accessible via the HSP site itself, if one searches for the terms “online exhibit” and “Italian-American traditions Balch” on Google, the online exhibition immediately comes up at the top of the list (<http://www2.hsp.org/exhibits/Balch%20exhibits/italian/italian.html>). Clearly, such inaccessibility is less than ideal.

Italian-American Traditions is called an online exhibit. This is, however, a misnomer since it is merely a scan of an exhibition catalog that accompanied a Balch Institute for Ethnic Studies gallery exhibition in 1985: A paper copy of the catalog is part of the HSP library collection. For readers who are unaware, the Balch, located at South Seventh Street in Philadelphia, closed its doors and merged its manuscript and photographic collections with HSP in January 2002. As a direct result of this acquisition, HSP now has one of the largest ethnic-history research collections in the United States.

The history of the original Balch exhibition lies in the preface written by Mark Stolarik, the institute’s president at the time. The exhibition was co-sponsored by the Balch Institute and the Italian Folk Arts Federation of America, itself an outgrowth of the Italian Folk Art Project. The Folk Art Project was begun in 1977 at the Nationalities Service Center of Philadelphia under the leadership of Elba Farabegoli Gurzau, who was an established presence in the Italian-American community promoting Italian folk arts for decades. The exhibition was a collaborative effort, as Balch projects tended to be, involving advising scholars, graduate research assistants from the University of Pennsylvania’s Folklore and Folklife Department, local Italian Americans, Italian-American organizations, and other major institutions such as Temple University’s Urban Archives, and the support of the Pennsylvania Humanities Council. With Grace Russoniello as the guest curator, the exhibit’s focus was on Italian-American daily life, emphasizing cultural and aesthetic practices and religious and family life. The longer-term institutional goal was to collect and maintain an Italian-American Research Collection that would range from paper ephemera to artifacts. When the Balch closed, all the museum artifacts were deaccessioned. Although an effort was made to donate the Italian-American artifact collection to one institution, the attempt was unsuccessful, and a public auction of the items was eventually held.

Even with the comprehensive subject of the catalog/exhibit, there are only six pages to scroll through online. The catalog text is a brief overview of the great wave of Italian immigration during the late nineteenth century. It relates a standard tale

of immigrants arriving and establishing communities, ending with mention of the resurgence in ethnic pride during the 1960s. There are references to commonalities in the Italian immigrant experience that were shared across communities. The focus is said to be on Pennsylvania's Delaware Valley. However, when mention is made of Roseto, which is in Northampton County in the Lehigh Valley, and Scranton and Wilkes-Barre, in the Lackawanna River Valley in the anthracite region, the regional approach falls apart. The text appears to be a compilation of the exhibition panels. The online catalog is not dated, but an online library search lists the publication date as 1985. Further, the photographs accompanying the text are disappointing due to their small size—they only enlarge slightly when clicked on. Unfortunately, even the usefulness of the photographs for further research is problematic since there is no collection identification attached to any of them. Thus, the catalog is primarily useful for its photographs and references that give clues to HSP's manuscript holdings that pertain to Italian Americans.

Other Balch catalogs have also been scanned and mounted on the current HSP website. These Balch catalogs as well as newer online exhibits found at the HSP History Online link, although not exhibition catalogs, all resemble antiquated gallery exhibitions. That is to say, they feature documents from the HSP's collection for which an unproblematic linear story text was developed. Moreover, there is no interactivity involved, and therein lies the problem with all of these so-called online exhibits.

A few historical societies (e.g., the Chicago History Museum, formerly the Chicago Historical Society) and some museums (e.g., the Walker Art Center, the Exploratorium, and the Victoria and Albert Museum) are in the vanguard of web-savvy institutions that not only understand the value of attracting visitors via the Internet but that have participatory engagement as their goal. Many institutions seem to lack the leadership, staff, budget, and/or interest to develop an interactive web model that puts visitors' needs first.

In fact, the only truly interactive link on the HSP website is PhilaPlace.org, which I created and directed as the Director of Education and Outreach at HSP. When we launched the site in December 2010, *PhilaPlace: Sharing Stories from the City of Neighborhoods* was heralded by digital humanities professionals as a model of interactivity both for its use of HSP's collections and for the way it allowed ordinary people to share their own stories and photographs, thus creating a dynamic online collection. It follows social-media theorist Seb Chan's (2012) dictum: "Museums will not be able to properly understand and integrate 'digital' into their organizational DNA until they have substantial born-digital collections." Since its launch, PhilaPlace has been relegated to the HSP's back burner, an action that speaks to the institution's priorities.

The problems with the *Italian-American Traditions: Family and Community* online exhibit underscore the larger issues concerning HSP's digital presence: disinterest in or misunderstanding of how essential an interactive interface is for an institution's future. As long as HSP stays this course, its web presence will remain primarily as it is today, an online resource for its library holdings and manuscript collections. The HSP website and its exhibits will not attract new and media-savvy visitors interested in history and culture who routinely search for what is interesting via the Internet.

Instead, it will remain a locus of research for scholars and genealogists who are already aware of the wealth of its collections.

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Works Cited

Chan, Seb. 2012. "Museums and Making the 'Digital Shift.'" *Fresh and New(er)*, March 11. <http://www.freshandnew.org/2012/03/museums-making-digital-shift/> (accessed May 10, 2012).