

Exhibition Review

"Guitar Heroes: Legendary Craftsmen from Italy to New York."

Curated by Jayson Kerr Dobney.

Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, NY.

February 9–July 4, 2011.

In February 2011, the Metropolitan Museum of Art opened its exhibition about guitar craftsmen of Italian heritage, which occupied the entire ground floor of the Lehman Wing. Curated by Jayson Kerr Dobney, "Guitar Heroes: Legendary Craftsmen from Italy to New York" traced the cultural and technical continuity from sixteenth-century luthiers of both northern and southern Italy to twentieth-century makers of mandolins and guitars of Manhattan's Little Italy and Long Island. The ultimate focus was on the work of three Italian-American luthiers, spanning three generations: John D'Angelico (1905–1974), his apprentice, James D'Aquisto (1935–1995), and James Monteleone (b. 1947). The exhibition was by all accounts a stunning success for raising the standard for both musical instrument display and multiple modes of access for the public.

The gallery display was spectacularly mounted, with dozens of superb Italian instruments, from a 1559 Amati violin to a guitar made by Antonio Stradivari himself (ca. 1700) as well as a range of other early guitars, lutes, and mandolins in the museum's permanent collection to complement the stunning examples of the twentieth-century work of the featured craftsmen. Laid out clockwise around four galleries, the exhibition led visitors through the golden age of Italian string instrument making, into the New York workshop environment where D'Angelico's tool bench, forms, clamps, and tools were on display, along with a large screen displaying a video of D'Aquisto at work through the stages of an instrument's construction. These were complemented by a fine array of the products of early New York Italian workshops including innovative mandolin designs. From there, three galleries highlighted the invention of the archtop guitar by Orville Gibson in the 1890s and its refinement and elaboration at the hands of the featured craftsmen. Each of the three luthiers was given his own room with examples of guitars, photos of prominent musicians who played them, and thorough explanatory text panels.

What distinguished this exhibition from previous instrument displays was that it was comprised of four distinct sets of presentation media. The traditional gallery display was accompanied by a thoroughly researched, accessibly written, and illustrated forty-eight page guide, published by the museum and Yale University Press in 2011. Over a period of five months, the public programs included thirteen concerts, multiple gallery talks by the curator, hands-on programs for all ages, and a film, affording audiences multiple opportunities to learn about the wider context of the subject and to hear music from the instruments made by the craftsmen in the hands of master musicians.

The full scope of images and information from the exhibition can also be found in its entirety in the digital domain. The museum's Digital Media Department played a major role in developing a multimedia guide featuring images, label text, audio

samples, and video clips of interviews and performances related to every item on display in the exhibit. This guide was made available for iPods for rent at the exhibition, and, in a significant move to the current mobile digital domain, it is available as a free download on iTunes (<http://itunes.apple.com/us/app/met-guitars/id414964902>). Through these digital platforms and the website (<http://blog.metmuseum.org/guitar-heroes/>), one can virtually visit the exhibition at any time and place.

Readers of this journal will naturally be interested in the exhibition's focus on Italian and Italian-American instrument makers and on the related sociocultural context of the immigrant experience reflected in the narrative of the project. The primary documented connection is the confluence of the rise of the mandolin as an instrument of popular song from the 1880s into the first two decades of the twentieth century and the increasing Italian immigration that occurred in that period. The craftsmen who emigrated from Naples and other regions of southern Italy contributed not only to the spread of this instrument, as well as its attendant musical styles and repertoire, but also to the manufacture of superb instruments themselves, in a variety of styles and construction techniques. Among these were the traditional lute-style bowed backs, round carved bowl backs, and the caved archtop variety. It was the latter style that was conducive to the craftsmen's transition into producing the emerging archtop guitars that had already been introduced by the Gibson Company in Michigan. The key features that would have come naturally to Italian violin makers would have been the carved arches of the soundboards and instrument backs and the use of f-holes on either side, rather than round, center sound holes under the strings.

While the exhibition certainly foregrounded the featured craftsmen, the early New York-made mandolins and accompanying text documented quite extensively that dozens of other Italian craftsmen worked in the New York metropolitan area. Among these were Angelo Mannello, who arrived in New York in 1885 and made mandolins under the Bruno company name; Luigi Ricca, whose workshop trained many other Italian-American luthiers before expanding to produce pianos in 1898; and Nicola Turturro and Luigi Mozzani, whose innovative lyre-shaped mandolins were featured in the exhibition.

A key element of the historical narrative of the exhibition was the decline in popularity of the mandolin in the 1920s and the subsequent closing of many workshops. John D'Angelico stood out among a handful of craftsmen who were able to develop what they had practiced in the mandolin trade to establish mastery in the construction of the emerging archtop jazz guitar. While this style of instrument was in mass production by Gibson and other companies, D'Angelico established a niche among makers of handmade and custom instruments, applying Italian craftsmanship to new forms, and thus maintaining an Italian presence in American guitar making. While the earliest known D'Angelico guitars were almost exact copies of the Gibson L-5 guitar, like one featured in the exhibition, D'Angelico quickly developed new features and styles, including art deco ornamentation that culminated in his signature "New Yorker" line of guitars, which featured the step-pyramid form of the New Yorker Hotel on the instruments' headstocks. His became the instruments of choice of legendary players from Chet Atkins in the country domain to jazz guitarists Grant Green and George Benson.

James D'Aquisto's biography is in keeping with the Italian-American narrative through his traditional apprenticeship with D'Angelico from 1953 until the latter's

death in 1974. On the other hand, John Monteleone, the only living member of the exhibit's featured trio, never met D'Angelico but came to know him through his instruments, which Monteleone repaired while working for the Mandolin Brothers string instrument company on Staten Island. Monteleone did not apprentice with D'Aquisto but knew him and often visited his shop. Like many great luthiers, Monteleone learned through very close observation of the minute details of musical instrument construction and repair. Monteleone's story actually documents an equally interesting path, as his family had a long history in woodwork and specialty manufacturing that included work for the emerging aircraft industry on Long Island during World War II. He found his way to guitar making by his own choice and path and reconnected to the other craftsmen through their work.

The exhibition's display and text narrative placed the craftspeople who built the guitars at the front and center of the story. While the guitars themselves are works of great precision and beauty, it is the personal reflection on the stories of the luthiers themselves, their sociohistorical and cultural milieu, and their mastery of material and techniques that brought this exhibition to life. The nearly mystical fascination that Americans have for the guitar may partly explain the success of this exhibition and the considerable support that the Metropolitan Museum raised to stage it. But once there, visitors were exposed to a much wider frame of reference for the instruments.

It is useful to reflect on the full scope of this exhibition. Through the various digital media, the exhibition continues to be accessible for the foreseeable future. In this regard, the Metropolitan Museum has indeed raised the bar for future exhibitions of musical instruments or the work of any identified artisans, for that matter. Clearly, it is a great advantage to be able to hear these craftsmens' instruments played. Other major instrument collections, including the Metropolitan Museum's permanent collection, feature online catalogs of instruments, images, and, sometimes, audio clips. "Guitar Heroes" augments these presentation modes with its online incorporation of multiple performance and interview segments. Museums are always contending with the issue of the static art object, removed from its original context and in many respects from everyday life. This exhibit, through its use of multiple sources of information and presentation formats as well as live interactive programs, has decisively shown that exhibitions can push the limits of the museum experience.

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