

CREATIVITY *and* WORLD WAR II ITALIAN POWS *in the* UNITED STATES



Italian Service Unit member crafting an inlaid wooden box, unknown date and location.
Courtesy National Archives.

Creativity and World War II Italian POWs in the United States

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Designed by Polly Franchini

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THIS EXHIBITION presents creative works by Italian soldiers held captive by the Allied forces during World War II, emphasizing those brought to the United States. These objects were often made from salvaged materials, and they ranged in size from a small inlaid ring to a large Catholic chapel with a sixty-five-foot bell tower. Such pieces were made by men far from their homes, with no sense of when they would return to Italy and with limited contact with their families and little news of the war.

With its focus on art production and creative action, the exhibition might feel celebratory to some, but the horrors of war are never far from the men's cultural productions. Some pieces reference the conflict, others show clear ties to Fascism. The exhibit includes the latter works so as to confront Italy's vexing history and by doing so challenge us in our contemporary moment.

The exhibition and its images tell stories about men held in captivity during wartime in a foreign land who, given the often favorable conditions in which they found themselves, were able to create beauty in confining spaces. It is a story that focuses on United States enemy combatants, some of whom became allies midway through the war while others remained committed Fascists. It is also a story about the continued link between captured Italians and the established Italian American communities and the ways in which identities were remade in the calamity of war. Together these stories create overlapping narratives that are hard to see or understand in a single photograph or object.

About 1.2 million Italian servicemen were incarcerated during the war. About half were captured by the Allies and imprisoned in camps across the globe. Of those, more than 51,000 were brought to the United States and ultimately placed in camps located from Massachusetts to the Territory of Hawai'i.

In September 1943 Italy surrendered to the Allies and then declared war on Germany. In the following months the status changed for both Italian soldiers in German-occupied territory (including parts of Italy) and Italian POWs previously captured and imprisoned by the Allies. Those Italian soldiers who were unwilling to fight with the Axis forces were captured; the Nazis categorized these circa 600,000 men as Italian Military Internees.

In the meantime, the US military re-categorized the 51,000 Italian POWs in their hands as either collaborating or non-collaborating. Collaboration generally meant more liberties, such as low-security camps, opportunities to travel outside the camps, and increased pay for their labor. These approximately 35,000 men became members of Italian Service Units (ISUs), while the remaining 16,000 were reclassified as non-collaborating POWs. (Other complications and processes happened with those Italian POWs in British control or Russian control.)

The differing realities of POWs in the United States are reflected in how their presence has entered into cultural histories: from the real Alberto Burri, the postwar Arte Povera artist who went from being a physician to a visual artist while a non-collaborating POW in Hereford, Texas, to the fictional baker Enzo Aquello, in Mario Puzo's *The Godfather*, an ISU member in New York who longed to marry and settle in the United States.

There is no archive or collective depository about World War II Italian prisoners of war in Allied hands. The documentation of their creativity exists today sometimes in various places that this exhibit has pulled from: historical photographs, rare remaining artifacts, oral testimonies, written accounts, family memories, and private collections. This exhibition brings together a selection of objects, images, and stories to present this little-known history and the ways identity and imagination are shaped materially during the adverse conditions of war.

LAURA E. RUBERTO, Berkeley City College
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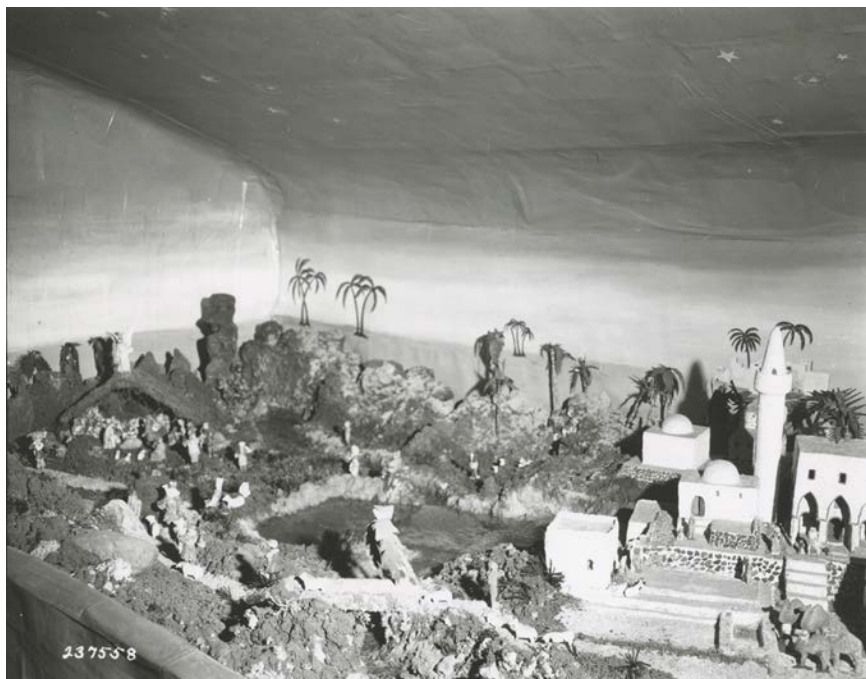
SELECTED IMAGES



Tommaso Barbieri decorating a Christmas cake
at the Benicia Arsenal ISU Camp, California,
unknown date. Courtesy Laura E. Ruberto.



POW Carlo Vannucci's oil painting *Boats Viareggio*, created in Cowra Prisoner of War Camp, Australia, circa 1944–1946. Courtesy Australian War Memorial.



Non-collaborating POWs built this *presepio*—Italian nativity scene—near Schofield Barracks, Hawai'i, January 5, 1945. The Islamic architecture suggests a North African setting. Courtesy National Archives.



The Letterkenny Chapel, made by ISU members, was consecrated on May 13, 1945, Chambersburg, Pennsylvania, and is still used by the local community today. Photo by Joseph Sciorra.



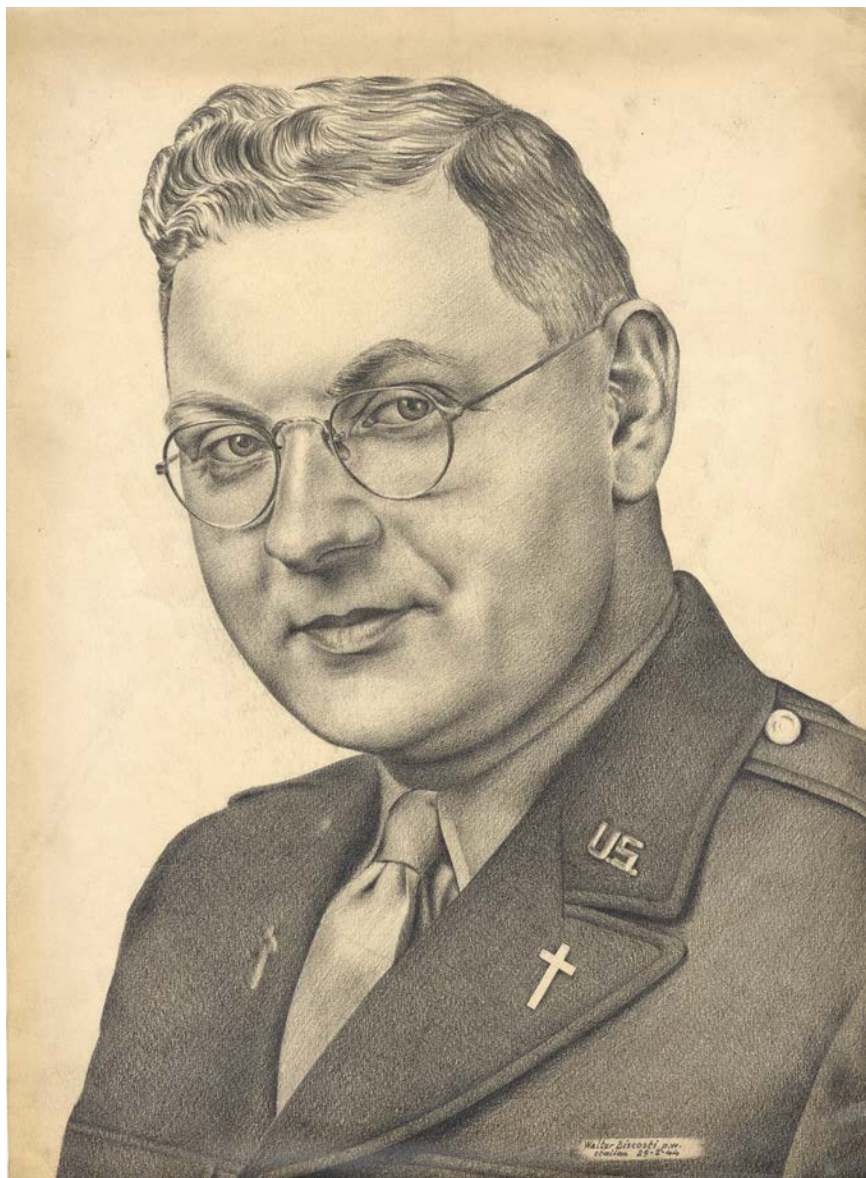
The Hula Dancer, 1944, by non-collaborating POW Alfredo Giusti, Sand Island, Honolulu, Hawai'i. Today members of the US Coast Guard place Hawaiian leis on the statue during ceremonial occasions as a talisman. Photo by Laura E. Ruberto.



POW Vincenzo Sergi recreates the Cathedral of Messina in miniature from ration tins, unknown North African location, 1944. Courtesy Laura E. Ruberto.



Printed card for Easter at the ISU Lathrop Camp, California, 1944.
Courtesy National Archives.



Pencil sketch of an unknown US chaplain made by pre-armistice POW Walter Discosti, Camp Douglas, Wyoming, February 29, 1944. Courtesy Laura E. Ruberto.



Playing bocce, unknown location and date. Courtesy National Archives.



Donato Ruberto crafted this replica Italian tank from recycled wood while in captivity, probably after he became an ISU member. He inscribed it to his nephew, who was serving in the US Air Force. In 2014, his grandson donated it to the Heinz History Center in Pittsburgh, where Ruberto migrated after the war. Courtesy Senator John Heinz History Center.



Domenico Iacobone was incarcerated in Camp Hereford (for non-collaborating Italian POWs), where he painted and participated in camp exhibitions. After the war he painted scenes from his POW experience, like this undated work titled *Box con prigionieri*. Courtesy Matteo Iacobone.



Leaning Tower of Pisa yard sculpture made by ISU members,
Lathrop Engineer Depot, Lathrop, California, unknown date.
Courtesy National Archives.



ISU men and Italian American women picnic together
near Lathrop, California, unknown date.
Courtesy National Archives.



A double portrait, etched-metal picture frame with its depiction of a minaret and palm trees suggests a North African site of creation, unknown maker, October 14, 1943. The inscribed Italian text reads, "Souvenir P.V. October 14, 1943/I remember you both always with affection." Courtesy Laura E. Ruberto.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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