

From Steerage Class to Museum: Interpreting Italian American Material Culture in Multiple Contexts

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Abstract

Italian Americans, and others, have used material objects to express a sense of Italian diasporic identity, history, and culture. This paper considers the ways in which material culture has been re-contextualized and interpreted (or not) in museum settings and other public spaces in an effort to comment on the ideological implications of different styles and approaches to the display of an ethnic group. My focus is on six self-defined “Italian American” museums in the United States and the Museo Nazionale Emigrazione Italiana in Rome; I also consider some public monuments. My interest is in how objects are called into action as a political act within such spaces—whether to support, for example, a feminist recuperation of traditional domestic skills (e.g., a display of hand embroidery work) or a white-ethnic conservative narrative (e.g., a Christopher Columbus statue).

I reflect on how new and different meanings come about when objects move between different “regimes of value,” as Arjun Appadurai suggests. A material culture studies approach to immigrant history allows scholars to reveal regionally- and temporally-specific expressions of experiences for those who did not consciously document themselves. The items immigrants bring along or leave behind—whether personal, hand-made objects or mass-produced consumer items—tell us much about how they shaped their own experiences. After migration, too, ethnically-coded objects, assert meaning through their design, their form, and their use by immigrants and their descendants. Items developed, refashioned, or otherwise involved in an Italian American ethnic community reflect or inform the values, beliefs, and experiences of that community. It is the friction between a series of relationships—between private and public, ethnic and mainstream, authentic and repackaged—that I am interested in exploring, ultimately demonstrating how objects can be collectively ascribed ethnically-infused values while also being charged with historical and political significance.