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Italia-stile: "Made in Italy" and the Making of Italianness
Issue 15.1 of California Italian Studies (Fall 2026)

Edited by Claudio Fogu and D. Medina Lasansky

Since the early 1960s, the phrase *Made in Italy* has recaptured the mythic quality that Rinascimento and *Risorgimento* commanded in earlier ages—and gone beyond it. While gesturing to the resurgence of a traditional connection between Italianness and aesthetic creativity, "made" in Italy is not simply a signifier of locality; it is a mytheme to be read *tutt'attacato* (all in one word). *Madeinitaly* is a unique signifier of uniqueness and distinction on a global scale; it captures the performative and normative concept of "style" connected to synesthetic affect, as in the idea of "having style," pinning it against the descriptive conception of style, understood as consistency of aesthetic traits, i.e., "being in style."[1] While feeding on the relative accessibility and ubiquity of clothing, madeinitaly sets itself in direct opposition to the homogenizing forces of fashions. In this respect, it also gestures towards the primacy of "making Italianness" over both "making Italy" and "making Italians" in the long history of what Roland Barthes appropriately named "Italianicity," or the condensed essence of everything that could be called Italian.[2] On the other hand, ideas of Italianness have long preceded both the formation of the nation-state and the belated cultural goal of *fare gl'italiani* (making Italians). Our primary intention in issuing our call for papers was to stimulate critical reflections on this long-durée archaeology of Made in Italy. We cannot say we have achieved this goal—though several articles touch on it—but what we received and are presenting to our readers is both more cohesive and more surprising than we expected.

To begin with, despite the variety of disciplinary approaches, almost all contributions share one or more elements, evoking a Wittgensteinian family resemblance more than a Foucauldian archaeology.[3] Fashion is definitively the queen bee of the collection connecting the contributions of D. Medina Lasansky, Michiko Arai, Gianmarco Gronchi, and Marcella Martin; but Lasansky's concern with architecture links her to Anna Mascorella, and while gender connects Martin to Alice Parrinello, Arai's focus on race brings her essay in line with Jenny Lin's, and Amitabh Vikram Dwivedi's; Lin, in turn, shares the same concern with what the mythic notion of "Made in Italy" conceals as Marco Ruggieri, while Dwivedi's focus on materiality matches that of Emiliano Guaraldo on petroleum fibers. These ten contributions also share a common constructivist trait typical of the articles published by interdisciplinary and cultural studies journals such as this one. They all, in one way or another, highlight the ideological, mythic, or simply culturally constructed nature of Made in Italy and/or Italianness. Two contributions, however, are clearly at odds with this group and—frankly—with the criterion of criticality explicitly stated in the policies of this journal. They come from scholars who specialize in pedagogy: Borbala Samu and co-authors Enza Antenos and Ryan Calabretta-Sajder. Both articles take the term *Made in Italy* at face value, conflating the referent and signified as their point of departure, to highlight its pedagogical potential to innovate, sustain, and improve the teaching of Italian as a foreign language. We had

[1] Claudio Fogu, "*Fascismo-Stile*," in *Spectator* 21, no. 2 (2001): 56-67.
[2] Roland Barthes, "Rhetoric of the Image," in *Image/Music/Text* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1977) 32–51.
[3] Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, trans. G.E.M. Anscombe, P.M.S. Hacker, and Joachim Schulte, 4th edition (New York: Wiley-Blackwell, 2009), Part I, sections 65–71; Michel Foucault, *The Archaeology of Knowledge*, trans. A.M. Sheridan Smith (New York: Pantheon Books, 1972).

not expected to receive articles of this sort, but we are convinced that their inclusion provides a useful *controcanto* to the critical posture of most of the others and Italian studies more generally. At the same time, they also offer alternative genealogies of Made in Italy (Antenos and Calabretta-Sajder) or historical valorizations of its connection to Italianness (Samu) that, in turn, can be read against the grain and stimulate further critical reflections.

As appropriate as it would have been to group our articles around their shared family resemblances or divide them along the axes of "constructivist" and "face value" approaches to the topic, we have opted for highlighting two dimensions that cut across the latter polarization and may represent the most surprising and timely novelty emerging from this collection. Half of the articles address the transnational dimension rather than the self-referential national dimension of Made in Italy. The "transnational turn," most recently explored by *Forum Italicum* and earlier articulated in volume nine of this journal ("Italia senza frontiere/Borderless Italy"), thus seems to be in full swing in this field of research, ostensibly dedicated to studying a quintessential element of "national" identity. We thereby present the articles in this volume in two categories: those dealing with the "transnational dimension" and those focusing on the "national dimension" of the phenomenon.

The Transnational Dimension

As in the case of "making Italians," the agents responsible for making Made in Italy have not been exclusively internal. Three contributions explore specifically the transnational dimension of "Made in Italy" on the production side. Considering "collaborations between Italian and Chinese brands, artists, curators, artisans, and fashionistas" Jenny Lin's article ("Dispelling 'Made in Italy vs. China' Myths in Contemporary Art and Fashion") seeks to "complicate these vastly oversimplified categorizations" by highlighting globalized production modes and creative endeavors that bridge Italian and Chinese cultures and dispel pernicious myths of national purity. She considers collaborations between Italian and Chinese brands, artists, curators, artisans, and fashion producers. In the process, she spotlights projects that foster intercultural understanding. Her article highlights how globalized production dispels myths of national purity. Drawing on Arjun Appadurai's theory of global flows, Homi Bhabha's conceptualization of hybridity, and Bruno Latour actor-network theory, Amitabh Vikram Dwivedi explores what he calls the "reverse-authenticity" of madeinitaly. His article ("Italianness in Reverse: Made in the World, Consumed in Italy") focuses on the "globally sourced" materials that are "metabolized into culturally Italian goods," from durum to espresso coffee to non-native fabrics. He sees this process as proper myth-making, since "foreign materials are made to appear as self-evidently Italian" through narration, transformation, and consumption. "Made in Italy," he concludes, "naturalizes historically contingent relations of trade, labor, empire, and mediation into the appearance of national essence." Like Dwivedi, Emiliano Guaraldo and Alice Iacobone also examine the transnational-material basis of *madeinitaly* but focus on the role of petroleum and its chemical derivatives in Italian design ("Petroleum into Plastics: Polypropylene, Polyurethane, and the Petrochemical Substrate of Italian Design"). They zero in on household products produced by the firms Kartell and Gufram—respectively, from polypropylene and polyurethane—to argue that Italian plastics were key to carrying "the materiality of petroleum into the intimate spaces of the domestic household" globally. On that score, they conclude that reconsidered transnationally "through its inescapable petrochemical substrate," madeinitaly "is less a national tradition of aesthetic sensibility than a historically specific capacity for…giving fossil matter the sensory qualities that allow it to be

domesticated as though it were not fossil at all."

Turning their attention to the promotion of madeinitaly, three articles in this section take into consideration a fashion magazine (*Vanity*), an exhibition (*Metamorphoses: 1943–1968*), and Made in Italy as a pedagogical tool. In his study of *Vanity* magazine ("Fashioning Italianicity: *Vanity* Magazine and the Making of the 'Made in Italy'"), Gianmarco Gronchi highlights the important role media plays in constructing "Italianicity."[4] Focusing on this Barthian semiotic construct, the article shows how the magazine's construction of *stilismo* "actively championed a global Italian approach to fashion, that has come to define the much-celebrated 'Italian way of living,'" and did so by rejecting photographic reproduction in favor of stylized drawings of fashion products. In so doing, the magazine laid bare "the transnational appeal of a specific aesthetic code that responds to an 'Italianization' of fashion," and was "itself a quintessential Made in Italy product." Marcella Martin's contribution ("The Italian Metamorphosis (Continued): Germano Celant, Made in Italy, and the Making of Italianness in the 1990s") focuses on the transnational activities of the dean of postwar Italian art critics, Germano Celant. Specifically, the article discusses the genesis and organization of the celebrated 1994 exhibition *The Italian Metamorphosis: 1943–1968* in New York City, showing the double role it played in inserting fashion into the narrative of postwar "Italian Art," and, simultaneously, giving it an edge over design in strengthening "the image of glamor and excellence that has become the hallmark of Made in Italy." At the same time, Martin concludes, Celant's exhibition also served to dethrone the connection between French fashion and "high art" that "had dominated since at least the end of the nineteenth century." Closing this section is Enza Antenos and Ryan Calabretta-Sajder's "Making Italianness Case by Case: Pedagogical Bridges between Culture and Career," which explores the intersection of "case study" methodology and "Made in Italy" in teaching Italian abroad, and for Italian studies more generally. The authors examine how language underscores the Made in Italy concept for those studying Italian. Italianness becomes encoded in the global narrative of superior craftsmanship and style. Yet, while the article treats "Made in Italy" as a positive "sociocultural construct grounded in specific sectors and symbolic economies" uniquely useful for the teaching of Italian in the United States from elementary through higher education, its conclusions highlight the "post-Made in Italy" potential "to rethink authenticity, territoriality, and branding in light of transnational flows." Such an approach, the authors conclude, invites students "to interrogate both the promises and contradictions of the label, examining how firms negotiate reputational capital, ethical claims, and market expectations in an era of globalized production."

The National Dimension

In this section, the reader will find articles that, while containing elements of transnationality, explore specifically the intersection between the history of "making Italianness" and the contemporary construction of *madeinitaly*. We begin where we ended the transnational section with an article by Borbala Samu ("Dal Grand Tour al Made in Italy: Insegnare la cultura italiana tra patrimonio, linguaggi settoriali e saperi") on the historical importance of the Grand Tour in constructing an idea of Made in Italy in terms of gastronomy, music, art, and language, as well as a model for a pedagogy based on the "integrazione tra aula e fuori aula" (integration of the classroom and what lies beyond). Travel to Italy was always connected to experiencing and consuming culture. In most cases, travelers brought objects back home, furthering the interest in Italy and Italian culture. They needed to study sites and art in person and in situ. This also helped

[4] See footnote 2.

circulate Italian as a courtly language among Europe's upper classes, increasing their familiarity with Italianness. Samu's didactic proposal seeks to organize foreign students' study of Italian in Italy around "testi autentici" (authentic texts) that promote Made in Italy. The idea is for foreign youth to experience and bring home Italian language skills as a key component of the madeinitaly compound. Shifting attention to the role that architectural sites played in the Grand Tour and beyond, Anna Mascorella reconstructs the complicated story of the restoration of Santa Maria degli Angeli in Rome—a true architectural palimpsest ("Making Italianness at Rome's Piazza Termini: The Restoration of Santa Maria degli Angeli at the Baths of Diocletian and Roma 1911"). The building was originally the ancient Roman Baths of Diocletian, modified by Michelangelo, and later overhauled in the mid-1700s by the Neapolitan architect Luigi Vanvitelli. For those arriving from Termini train station, the structure proved important. Travelers came upon it en route to the historic city center. As Mascorella notes, the building "reveals how style, historic preservation, and urbanism combined to negotiate and ultimately construct the aesthetic codes of Italianness at this most potent of sites." Specifically, the article explores how its *fin-de-siècle* restoration rejected a specifically southern inflection of the Baroque (Vanvitelli's), making it part and parcel of the process by which Italy's south was actively suppressed in the laborious construction of Italian national identity.

Mascorella also argues that the Santa Maria degli Angeli restoration marked a shift in the Mediterranean imaginary of Italians towards linking *romanità* to empire. This is the background against which Michiko Arai places the writings of the influential fashion designer Rosa Genoni (1867–1954). Although a prominent feminist and advocate for workers' rights, when it came to fashion, Genoni was all about "stirpe," "fisionomia," and "razza" (lineage, physiognomy, and race). Playing with the biopolitics of resurgence—Rinascimento-Risorgimento—her writings characterized Italian fashion as an expression of an *italianità* "innate and inherited rather than learned." Arai sees this discursive move as extending to the contemporary fashion scene that "continues to be thoroughly interpellated by the rhetoric of nation formation, replete with Risorgimento-era tropes and biopolitical underpinnings of the individual and national bodies." As if responding—but in reverse—to this last point, Marco Ruggeri's analysis of Roberto Saviano's *Gomorra* explores the contemporary biopolitics of "Made in Naples" fashion. Drawing on Michel Foucault, Ruggeri presents the novel as an archaeology of the "*glocal* dimension of *Made in Italy*" and a reversal of the traditional association of fashion with Milan and glamor, in favor of Neapolitan liminality, "depletion and drain." While cautious in its embrace of the novel's documentary value, Ruggeri highlights its "decentering of the human referent" and its treating "the Made in Italy…as a monument: a discursive formation shaped by the power dynamics of a particular historical moment, a representation that distorts, emphasizes, and erases rather than merely reflecting."

Staying close to the sea of *Gomorra* but shifting attention from literature to cinema, Alice Parrinello's article ("Hydroqueer: Fluid Waterscapes and the Re-Making of the Italian Family") contrasts the correlation between *Mare Nostrum* politics and the conservative defense of heteronormative family values, with the connection between LGBTQIA+ communities and the fluid space of the Mediterranean. Analyzing films that "create queer families," Parrinello identifies and proposes an "alternative mode of Italianness grounded in fluidity and deriving from projecting the Mediterranean onto Italy." Closing this section and the whole issue is a research proposal published in "Notes from the Field" by co-editor D. Medina Lasansky ("The New Monuments Men: Fashion Houses, Restoration, and the Corporate Occupation of Italian Heritage"). Here, the author explores how luxury and fashion houses have colonized public space and overemphasized

their philanthropic generosity, turning restoration in Italy into good business. The article surveys nineteen restoration projects at iconic sites such as the Colosseum in Rome, the Uffizi in Florence, and the Rialto Bridge in Venice, initiated and paid for by firms at the top of the glamor mountain over the past fifteen plus years. Lasansky catalogs them into three classes: “Philanthropic restoration,” “Scenographic Backdrop,” and “Adaptive Rescue.” In every case, she shows how generosity has been deployed as a savvy marketing strategy, taking advantage of two structural developments: the Art Bonus tax credit (2014) and the banking sector’s retreat from underwriting “much of the country's cultural philanthropy.”