

woven lives

exploring women's needlework from the italian diaspora

By Susan Van Allen

All photos courtesy of IAMLA



Many Italian Americans have boxes full of needlework stored in their closets, made by generations of women who came before them. Whether they are embroidered tablecloths, crocheted baby booties, or beaded purses, each contain rich stories of the lives of the women whose hands labored with care to make them.

In January 2022, the Italian American Museum of Los Angeles premiered *Woven Lives: Exploring Women's Needlework from the Italian Diaspora*, an exhibit that honors the creations of immigrant women and the beautiful tradition of Italian needlework they carried with them to America. IAMLA Director Marianna Gatto said over 200 submissions were received for the show, from all over the United States, Italy, and as far away as Australia. The result is a display that ranges from the humble to luxurious, spanning from mid-19th century to the present.

While the art of Italian lacemaking is honored in places such as the *Museo del Merletto* on the island of Burano in the Venetian lagoon, this Los Angeles museum show focuses on needlework used for more practical purposes—hand sewn, embroidered, or crocheted items used in the home, for dowries, or worn on special occasions.

"In Italian villages, women with their daughters and nieces could be seen outside their front doors or in the squares, crafting these pieces. It was a way to tell those who passed by... 'Look how well these girls are being raised, won't they make good wives?'" said Gatto. Many of these women brought their skills to American cities, such as New York or Boston, where they went

to work in garment factories, proud to be able to earn money to put bread on the table for their families.

Sadly, American factory work at the turn of the 20th century came with horrific conditions—long hours, low pay, and unsafe environments—in sharp contrast to the Italian village style. The IAMLA exhibit includes photos of the 1911 Triangle Shirtwaist Factory fire in New York, where many Italian immigrant women died. The tragedy was a wake-up call for a need for better labor legislation. More photos tell stories of Italian American women who went on to courageously fight for workers' rights, including such heroines as the Sicilian-Calabrese Angela Bambace, who became a powerful leader of the International Ladies Garment Workers Union.

Pieces also show how women's needlework expanded beyond the home to beautify communities, such as in a panel crafted for Our Lady of Pompei Church in New York's Greenwich Village, which was an important gathering place for Italians newly arrived in America. And bringing the story to the 21st century are shoes and clothes by Dolce & Gabbana and Missoni, that call on the inspiration of Italian traditional needlecraft to add flair to their designs.

At the museum's opening celebration, many of the descendants of the needleworkers were there, amazed to see their *nonna* and *zia*'s crafts so formally displayed, with photos of them in the captions.

"What's really humbling," said Gatto, "is that these women lived and died anonymously. They could never have imagined that their work would be displayed in a museum."

Here are a few of their stories:

Filomena Nuccia di Tomaso's Happy Bedspread

"My grandmother made this when she was only 15, around 1920, in Civitanova di Sannio in Molise," said Diana Lucarino-Diekman. The bedspread, with the word "*Felicità*" (Happiness) in its center, was sewn with the help of a village teacher and a booklet, *Ricami Norvegesi*, (Norwegian embroidery) that Lucarino-Diekman still has. It became a part of her grandmother's dowry when she married Giovanni, the village tailor.

In the early 1950s, Filomena and Giovanni left Molise for Cleveland to join their daughter, eldest of their five children, who had married and was starting a family there. They packed the bedspread with them.

Lucarino-Diekman has fond memories of "Grandma Nooch" in her Cleveland apartment: "Every week I'd go over to get her freshly baked bread or sometimes *pizzelle*. She didn't speak English, but she was always watching soap operas, and crocheting afghans, hot pads, and house slippers. And she loved to go to church, all the masses, every day, and even weddings and funerals of people she didn't know. She was such a presence at Saint Bartholomew's in Cleveland that they wrote her up in the church bulletin!"

As for the bedspread, Lucarino-Diekman discovered it amidst a box of beautifully embroidered table linens and lingerie that her mother had made. "I assumed my mother had embroidered '*Felicità*,' but when I found out it was something Grandma had done, it became even more valuable to us all, knowing it was so old."



Cecilia Scottini's Resourceful Creations

Gatto received many items made by Cecilia Scottini that tell the story of a resourceful woman who lived in Little Italy Los Angeles in the early 20th century. A shadow box displays a pot scrubber she crocheted using recycled butcher's twine, and a handkerchief made from a used sugar sack that she bleached to remove the printing and decorated with a crocheted border. Adding a fashionable touch are a drawstring purse with an "S" for Scottini at its center, and a stocking garter fashioned with pink beads and fringe.

"I love the stories Cecilia's son told me about his mother and grandmother when he donated these to the museum," Gatto said. The Scottini family left their home in Italy's northern Trentino-Aldige region in the 1880s to go to Mexico, where they joined about 1,500 other Italians who the Mexican government had recruited to set up farming communities. When the government didn't come through with promised payments, the Scottinis headed north to California, arriving in Los Angeles penniless. Cecilia's mother worked as a washerwoman and eventually saved enough money to buy a house and put it under her own name, as her husband, "wasn't interested in work." Cecilia remained vigilantly resourceful, as the shadow box shows.



IAMLA's Gallery display of needlework

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Francesca Perricone Cortese's Dowry Nightgown

"This nightgown came to me with an amazing love story," said Gatto. It began in the village of Lucca Sicula, in the province of Agrigento, Sicily, in the early 1900s, when a teenager, Francesca Perricone, made this nightgown to add to her wedding trousseau. Some years later, the village elders heard from Giovanni Cortese, who had grown up in Lucca Sicula and then moved to Pueblo, Colo. Cortese wrote asking for a wife to be sent to him, as the American woman he had married had abandoned him and his son.

Francesca accepted the invitation. She packed the nightgown, left her homeland, and arrived in America on June 4, 1921. Not knowing English, she found an Italian speaking porter and asked how to get to Pueblo by train. To Francesca's horror, the porter told her that Pueblo had been destroyed by a flood, just the day before. Still, Francesca got on the train to Colorado, where her brother miraculously intercepted her in Denver. He helped her make her way to Pueblo, where Giovanni, now John, was waiting for her.

John recovered from losing everything in the flood, and over the years he had a successful barbershop, restaurant, and farm in Pueblo. The city flourished, becoming one of the most culturally diverse in the West, thanks to its steel mill, which attracted a wide range of immigrant workers. Francesca and John had three children together, and in the 1940s moved to Los Angeles, eventually settling in Hollywood.

Francesca's daughter, now 93, heard about the IAMLA call for submissions, 100 years after her mother had packed that nightgown into her suitcase in Sicily. When she took it out of the box to tell the story, Gatto knew it was perfect for the exhibit.

Woven Lives: Exploring Women's Needlework from the Italian Diaspora is on display until October 16 at the Italian American Museum of Los Angeles. Visit: www.iamla.org. ▲