

TRANSATLANTIC TRANSFERS

edited by
Marta Aversa,
Gioele Cristofari,
Stefano Morello,
Matteo Santandrea,
Marta Zonca

It was Henry Corbin's gift to enable us to experience in this room thoughts that come from another language and culture, as if they were of our own hearts. He spoke from within his speech; he was his words. This rhetorical imaginative power is himma of which Corbin writes in his study of Ibn 'Arabī. This power of the heart is what is specifically designated by the word himma, a word whose content is perhaps best suggested by the Greek word entheism, which signifies the act of meditating, conceiving. Imagining, projecting, ardently desiring – in other words, of having (something) present in the thymos, which is vital force, soul, heart, intention, thought, desire.

James Hillman, The Captive Heart

Transatlantic Transfers. Objects, Aesthetics, and Narratives of Italy in the United States 1949–1972.

edited by Marta Averna, Gioele Cristofari, Stefano Morello,
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Marta Zonca

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Introduction

During the Cold War, Italian cultural identities spread to the United States through a bidirectional dialogue facilitated by artistic, cultural, and industrial exchanges.

The exhibition explores the impact and influence of Italian culture in the United States in the years following the end of World War II, a period when the dynamics of exchange between the two nations were at their most virtuous and organic. A wide array of media – including architecture and literature, music, fashion and design, cinema and the visual arts, as well as food, wine, and consumer culture – contributed to the transmission and interplay of two national cultural identities. These interconnected elements reveal a renewed narrative of transatlantic relations, underscoring how Italy's extraordinary wave of postwar intellectual, economic, and creative productivity shaped the lives of an emerging educated, affluent, and consumer-oriented American middle class. In so doing, the story we present highlights how Italy's contributions to North American culture have been far more significant than historically recognized.

Curatorial Statement

Exploring the impact and influence of Italian culture in the United States over a period as extensive as the one covered in this exhibition leads to encountering a heterogeneous succession of events, products, productions, spaces, subjects, narratives, and infrastructures. In such a fragmented framework, the relations between the two countries appear profoundly interdependent, whether they involve spontaneous and immediate contacts or are coordinated by institutions.

From the post-Second World War era onward, numerous artistic, cultural, and industrial vectors have contributed to the export and subsequent consolidation of *Made in Italy*, a brand that would become synonymous with Italian craftsmanship, quality, and design in the North American collective imagination. These elements encompass a wide range of domains, from architecture to literature, from popular music to fashion and design, from cinema and the visual arts *tout court* to food-and-wine culture and consumption, and only when placed side by side do they allow for the framework required to understand the transatlantic dialogue to emerge. The intersection of historical and cultural systems so distinct from one another was, in fact, triggered not only by the events in the immediate aftermath of the Second World War that led to a political reconfiguration of international relations, but also by a strong mutual fascination that significantly conditioned the perceptions and, consequently, the representations of the two countries.

Two exhibitions held at the Museum of Modern Art in New York – *Twentieth-Century Italian Art* (1949) and *Italy:*

The New Domestic Landscape (1972) – are emblematic of this relationship and mark the chronological boundaries of this exhibition. For Italy, this was a period of transformation – marked first by a vigorous reconstruction and later by rapid economic expansion – during which its relationship with the United States undoubtedly played a central role, starting from the aid provided through the *European Recovery Program* (informally known as the *Marshall Plan*), on which much of Italy's development depended. The Plan's proposed Americanization of lifestyle was only partially accepted and encountered resistance that underscored the uniquely Italian nature of the *economic miracle* while simultaneously highlighting *Made in Italy* in both national and international public discourse. Once the purported values of *italianità* (tradition, style, craftsmanship, sprezzatura, and good taste) reached the US market, they served the dual purpose of ensuring the competitiveness of Italian products and reassuring US citizens regarding the effectiveness of the Plan's investment and, indirectly, their own foreign policy's, during the critical years of the Cold War.

This exhibition results from four years of research conducted by various units at the Politecnico di Milano, the University of Eastern Piedmont, Roma Tre University, and the University of Gastronomic Sciences in Pollenzo. The Project of Relevant National Interest *Transatlantic Transfers: the Italian Presence in Post-War America: 1949/1972*, under whose auspices this exhibition was developed, carried out an initial mapping of cultural transfer during that period. Scholars from diverse disciplines collaborated to weave together heterogeneous content spanning such a

broad and complex time frame. The transdisciplinary nature of our research – systematically prompting dialogue among design, literature, consumer culture, and cinema – comes to form in this digital exhibition, with the goal of continuing to forge new connections beyond the project's completion. The findings of our inquiry – necessarily selective and partial – also include a series of publications and an online atlas mapping the individuals, networks, events, and objects facilitating these transfers. Together, they trace the contours of a still largely unexplored framework in transatlantic political and cultural relations. From the outset, the research groups deemed it essential to make the results accessible to both academic audiences and the broader public. The decision to produce an atlas and develop an exhibition as an Open Educational Resource, suitable for use both in the classroom and beyond, is rooted in the principles of Open Pedagogy, which call for an inclusive, participatory, and collaborative approach to learning and knowledge dissemination. While the atlas encourages open-ended exploration and allows narrative pathways to be tailored to meet various research or teaching interests, the exhibition offers specific interpretive perspectives that highlight, on the one hand, the relationship between rural tradition and post-Fascist industrialization and, on the other, the sources of fascination found by North American consumers in the idea of *italianità*, namely beauty, art, and culture.

These themes have often been relegated to the background by a historiography focused on US influence, but they emerge more clearly when examined through an interdisciplinary lens – from the production of knowledge

and ideas to politics and international relations, from scientific and material culture to publishing, literature, the visual arts, architecture, design, cinema, music, and food. Research in these domains has revealed the impact of intellectual, economic, and productive creativity in Italy's postwar cultural scene on the lives of an emerging American middle class – educated, affluent, and consumption-oriented. Italy provided this audience with cultural perspectives, products, aesthetic models, and emotional frameworks for identification and self-representation, shaping American culture far more significantly than previously recognized.

The exhibition is organized into six narrative pathways. The first is titled *Journeys and Impressions of Italy*. Along the routes mapped by American soldiers who had landed in Italy in July 1943 and, in the opposite direction, by immigrants seeking better opportunities in the US, postwar Italy became a popular tourist destination for Americans. The impressions collected by travelers, as well as those conveyed by the Italian filmic and literary imagination, flowed into the US artistic production of the time. Together, they form a heterogeneous yet coherent system that profoundly shaped the image of the *Bel Paese* in the international imagination.

The second section explores the influence of *Lifestyle*: the practices, spaces, brands, and habits that shaped a new Italian way of living arising from the *economic miracle* and the primarily social transformations it produced. *Lo stile italiano* made inroads into the US imagination through a range of products and productions that absorbed and embodied this anthropological and cultural shift, yield-

ing a captivating ensemble of images, symbols, objects, and emotional regimes imbued with powerful aesthetic and narrative resonance. In fashion and literature, cinema, design, and promotional advertisements, Italy thus emerged as a profoundly transformed country that presented itself to overseas observers as both sophisticated and alluring.

Postwar Italy also questioned its relationship with its own past, redefining itself as *A New Nation* undergoing a process of modernization that reshaped its economic and social structures. Within a few years, the country achieved a remarkable economic recovery, overcoming the devastation of the war, and underwent a political and cultural realignment centered on democratic ideals, leaving behind the shadows of twenty years of fascism. The environmental, artistic, and cultural landscape changed as well. New buildings and objects designed with experimental and innovative forms and materials manifested a distinctly Italian style recognizable beyond national borders. This process of re-signification also echoed in the ways Italian art, culture, and industry were presented to potential North American buyers, highlighting an artistic and cultural heritage that distanced itself from Fascism's classical references and instead drew on the Middle Ages and Renaissance, cradle of the ideal *artisan-philosopher* figure who defined a *New Italian Renaissance*.

In the aftermath of the Second World War, Italy's representations and projections encouraged a dialogue between tradition and innovation, revealing a nation that renewed itself not in spite of its roots but precisely through them. This idea is explored in the final two sections, *Who*

We Are, Who We Were, and Classical Reflections.

Indeed, after the war, the image of Italy had to reconcile a burdensome past with a rapidly changing present. Some of the depictions of the *Bel Paese* circulating in the United States reveal a society poised between tradition and modernity. While the literary narratives of Ignazio Silone and Carlo Levi or the cinematic works of Pietro Germi and Vittorio De Sica portray an archaic South, Italian furniture and fashion tell of an economic miracle triggered by the country's ability to harness tradition in the service of a modern, urban present. The picture that emerges is that of a nation firmly rooted in its origins but open to global dialogue, where the Italian *saper fare* (know-how) meets auteur cinema and where literature mediates between a mythical past and a prosperous future.

The integration of such a wide range of materials and studies reflects the prosperity of a period marked by economic recovery and the redefinition of a country in which a shared vision can be recognized even through very different experiences. The narrative trajectory we propose explores structures and modes of interaction among distinct cultures, shedding light on the processes through which a social group constructs and represents its cultural identity. Hence, the exhibition invites its virtual visitors to reflect on the multi-layered nature of Italian-American cultural relations, both as a subject in its own right and as a hermeneutic through which to examine the sets of actions and reactions sparked by the encounters of different cultures and worlds.

How to Navigate the Exhibition

The exhibition's six narrative pathways are organized into multiple thematically related subsections. After choosing a pathway from the top menu, visitors can select a subsection and access a set of visual and textual materials that exemplify the complexity of the relations between Italy and the United States during the period under examination.

Each sub-theme leads to a virtual space populated by objects, images, quotes, or figures presented as floating elements in the background. Clicking on each item – also accessible by title through the top menu – opens a pop-up with additional content: images, textual fragments, and archival materials navigable via dedicated arrows, accompanied by brief captions that contextualize their historical and cultural significance within the framework of transatlantic exchanges.

For the best experience, we recommend moving among pathways by following a thematic thread and retracing chronological and geographical connections. Exploring the interdisciplinary correlations among the curated materials offers an additional layer of interpretation: the understanding of each object is deepened when correlated with its matrix, a process that involves looking at the texts, testimonies, practices, and social, economic, and political contexts from which it arose. This hermeneutic allows visitors a more immersive experience that further facilitates a critical and aware understanding of the bidirectional nature of transatlantic cultural dialogue.

Journeys and Impressions of Italy

Postwar Italy in the Imagination of the American Middle Class: Literature, Cinema, and Modernity.

In the aftermath of World War II, Italy captivated American travelers as a land of desire. This allure was fueled by the works of authors such as Dante Arfelli and Alberto Moravia, the cinema of Roberto Rossellini, and promoted by cultural mediators such as Eleanor Clark, Jack Kerouac, and William Wyler. Beyond its purely artistic appeal, *lo stile italiano* spread through modern means of transport –airplanes and ocean liners –and the efforts of institutions like the Fulbright Commission, ENIT (Italian National Tourism Board), and international trade fairs.

a.1 Longing for Italy

In the postwar period, American fascination with Italy was shaped by an array of influences that cast the country as a dreamlike destination. Italy was presented as both a physical place and a sensory and emotional experience, exemplified by the romanticized depiction of its women and the allure of its culinary traditions. This dual image of a timeless and almost mythic Italy yet very much rooted in history and culture was further amplified by cinema. At the same time, modern transportation and US-sponsored programs made the *Bel Paese* more accessible than ever.

a.1.1 The Women of Rome

For the American middle class, the desire for Italy often carried overtly erotic connotations. This is evident

in the marketing of postwar Italian literature. Alberto Moravia's *The Woman of Rome*, originally published in the US in 1947 by FS&G, featured a provocative cover in its new paperback edition published by New American Library, which highlighted the protagonist's role as a prostitute. A decade later, Dante Arfelli's novel *The Unwanted* (1951) was rebranded as *The Girl of the Roman Night* (1958) in its paperback edition for American audiences. The similarly suggestive cover, featuring a semi-nude couple, also contributed to adding a layer of sensuality to the text's reception.

a.1.2 Jack Kerouac's Italy

Jack Kerouac also incorporated evocative and erotically charged projections of Italy in his novels. In *On the Road* (1957), Italy emerges as a place of refuge when the protagonist, Sal, suggests to Dean that they set sail there after their quest for meaning in America falters. Similarly, in *Visions of Cody* (written in 1951), Italy and its coasts offer an escape from American modernity and the perceived lack of authenticity of life at home. Kerouac's references reflect both the filmic and touristic projections of Italy in the American imagination and the enduring image of an authentic, timeless Italy untouched by modernity.

a.1.3 Roman Holiday

During the 1950s and 1960s, Hollywood's fascination with Italy resulted in a wave of *touristic* films that romanticized the country, as well as its people and products, while portraying it as both modern and timeless.

Urban spaces like Rome, Naples, and Venice became central to these depictions, with Rome standing out as the quintessential setting. William Wyler's *Roman Holiday* (1953) epitomized this trend, presenting the Eternal City as a fairy-tale realm balancing popular folklore and modern social vibrancy.

a.1.4 Rome and a Villa

A twofold perception of Rome is evident in Eleanor Clark's *Rome and a Villa* (1952), which juxtaposes descriptions of architecture, fountains, and artworks with reflections on the city's complex past. Clark portrays Rome as a city in constant evolution, dealing with the weight of its history while navigating its post-Fascist present. This tension – what Clark called a «battle between past and present» (Clark [1974] 1992) – resonated with American intellectuals, many of whom were encouraged to visit the city through initiatives like the Fulbright Commission and the American Academy in Rome, both of which fostered academic and cultural exchanges between Italy and the United States, by means, for instance, of scholarships such as the Rome Prize.

a.1.5 Playboy's Italy

Italy, as envisioned by Americans, was «audacious,» a term *Playboy* used to describe its cuisine – fiery, essential, and embodied by the chili pepper tracing the lips of a sketched face in a Thomas Mario article. This imagined Italy was steeped in history – «Now, remember... nothing A.D.... we only have time for B.C.» (Silverstein 1958) – while simultaneously leaping toward the future,

exemplified by elegant women gliding through Rome's streets on a Vespa or Lambretta. Italy became both a model and an inspiration for reimagining American lifestyles and modern homes, a seductive and arcane dream that drew travelers and dreamers to the Eternal City's enchanting streets.

a.1.6 ENIT's Branding

The yearning for Italy – also shared by Italian Americans wishing to go back after an unwanted farewell – was fostered by books, magazines, and the efforts of ENIT, the Italian state agency responsible for promoting the country as a tourist destination abroad. Through posters, films, brochures, and advertisements, ENIT advertised Italy as both a new world to explore and a place for rediscovering roots. This evolving strategy adapted to a changing audience, continuously enchanting them with modern means of storytelling.

a.1.7 Settebello

Modern transportation became a key specimen of Italian style. Ocean liners and airplanes offered both practical means of transportation and immersive experiences that showcased Italian engineering and design. The Settebello, the ETR300 train connecting Rome and Milan in six hours, embodied this spirit. During the journey, travelers could enjoy panoramic views, gourmet dining, and carefully curated interiors by designers like Minoletti and Ponti, blending functionality with Italian craftsmanship.

a.1.8 Nation Branding

Alitalia's entry into the US market in 1958 further capitalized on this appeal. The company's early advertisements juxtaposed images of Italy's iconic landmarks with promotional texts emphasizing speed, efficiency, and modernity. These campaigns skillfully combined tradition and innovation, reinforcing the ability of Italian identity to function as a bridge between the past and the future.

a.2 The Allure of Artistic Heritage

Italy's artistic and cultural heritage captivated Americans, with particular attention paid to landscapes, monuments, and villas, which often became gathering places for intellectuals and a privileged destination for many Americans visiting the country. This cherished heritage became both an object of admiration and an active participant in cinematic and literary narratives.

a.2.1 Italian Villas

Italian villas had long captivated Anglo-American audiences, as evidenced by Edith Wharton's *Italian Villas and Their Gardens* (1904). This fascination persisted in the postwar era, with landmarks such as Villa Adriana and Tuscany's estates inspiring works like Eleanor Clark's *Rome and a Villa* (1952) and Mary McCarthy's *The Stones of Florence* (1959). Historic villas and art cities became must-see attractions for American visitors, who viewed them as exemplars of Italy's wealth of artistic and cultural heritage.

a.2.2 Villas as Meeting Places

The image of Italy's countryside, Tuscany in particular, as a harmonious blend of natural beauty and cultural richness was influenced by figures such as Iris Origo, whose family renovated Villa La Foce, and the transnational author Arturo Vivante, whose stories for *The New Yorker* were often set at, or evoked, Villa Solaia. Such residences became a meeting ground for intellectuals and artists between the Fascist and postwar years. As early as the 1950s, they also welcomed paying guests and students from the United States. Ezra Pound and William Humphrey, among others, stayed at Villa Solaia.

a.2.3 Journey to Italy

Italy's landscapes and cultural heritage were frequently portrayed on the big screen, as evidenced by movies such as Roberto Rossellini's *Journey to Italy* (1954). Initially overlooked in the US, the film later gained acclaim for its aesthetic depth. In a famous sequence set in the halls of the National Archaeological Museum in Naples, the protagonist, Katherine Joyce (Ingrid Bergman), observes Roman statues in fascination before visiting the Acropolis of Cumae and the Fontanelle Cemetery. This scene effectively demonstrates how Italian heritage engaged audiences, prompting a dialogue between viewers and historical artifacts. In the film, the vestiges of the past come to life, with a group of dancers engaging in a silent exchange with Ingrid Bergman.

a.3 Beyond Tourism

Postwar Italy also emerged as an important economic

partner for the US, with its industrial and artisanal excellence showcased in newsreels, magazines, exhibitions, and videos such as those produced by the Milan-based studio Incom. The evolving relationship between the two countries reflected a new dynamic, as one American observer noted: «It's no longer just about tourists coming to Italy or migrants going to the US», it's a different kind of bond altogether, «more than just a friendship» (Gallo 1957).

a.3.1 Italian Craftsmanship

Italian design and craftsmanship impressed American audiences. Architecture, furniture, housing, and services reveal the formal quality as well as the artisanal ability to make unique pieces perfectly functional and integrated into their environment. For instance, sculptural objects produced by BBPR and Angelo Mangiarotti balanced artistry with practicality, blending tradition with modern production techniques.

a.3.2 A Transatlantic Network

A dense network of people, institutions, and publications supported Italy's commercial exchanges with the US. Even museums, department stores, trade fairs, and exhibitions—such as Triennials in Milan, the *DH58* at the Brooklyn Museum, and Macy's expositions—introduced Americans to Italian products, while editors, like Olga Gueft of *Interiors*, spotlighted Italy's elegance and innovation, opening up the domestic market and producing a broader international gaze towards Europe.

Lifestyle

The practices, spaces, and brands of a new *stile italiano* – understood both as the hallmark of artisanal and cultural excellence and as a lifestyle – deeply influenced the North American imagination and how the United States viewed Italy.

For Americans, Italy was no longer just a place, but an idealized way of living, expressed through an enchanting blend of symbols, places, objects, and customs. Ranging from the interiors of ocean liners, evoking Italy's rich artistic heritage, to literary, cinematic, and design works that reflected a distinctive lifestyle, these cultural trends and models became desirable through the direct or imagined experience of Italian spaces, gestures, and consumer goods. This cultural phenomenon emerged through a series of narratives, consumer goods, and productions that defined a new set of values and tastes, both reflecting the socio-cultural transformations unfolding in Italy during the 1950s and 1960s and embodying the complex, ambivalent, yet deeply appealing character of a modern Italian identity.

b.1 Italy Across the Ocean

At least until the late 1950s, through their steady crossings, transatlantic liners came to symbolize the intense – though not always equitable – dialogue between Italy and the United States. Ocean liners facilitated the movement of people, capital, goods, ideas, and affects between the two countries. They became the primary vehicles of a series of multilayered exchanges that,

after the era of mass migration, ushered in significant innovations in consumption and elevated the reputation of an emergent *Made in Italy* brand. These vessels also helped solidify the image of a new lifestyle in the American social imaginary. Designed with a holistic approach reminiscent of Renaissance and Baroque estates, yet reflecting modern aesthetic sensibilities, the interiors of these grand ships – adorned with the work of artists such as Salvatore Fiume and architects such as Gio Ponti – became floating showcases of Italian style and elegance on the Atlantic.

b.1.1 Italy at Sea

Until 1958, transatlantic liners were the primary link between the two nations. The carefully designed public and private spaces aboard these passenger ships – where spatial layout, boundaries, and furnishings were united in cohesive aesthetic projects blending objects, artworks, materials, modern technologies, and historical references – offered passengers a glimpse into a sophisticated and aspirational Italian lifestyle. Not only did these spaces narrate Italy's history but also anticipated its future, portraying the country as one in transformation, capable of harmonizing diverse elements and evolving its traditions. Much like during the Renaissance, Italy was presented as transcending its recent past and mediating the contradictions of uneven development with grace and ambition.

b.1.2 Daydreaming

The allure of this distinct lifestyle was further crafted

through skillful narratives, such as those presented in promotional materials for transatlantic voyages. They included collections of evocative images, photographs, and illustrations accompanied by descriptive and suggestive texts. Once aboard, menus, logbooks, and daily programs reinforced this carefully curated image. Advertisements, too, played a crucial role, merging the glamour of the liners with their chic, cosmopolitan passengers, while fashion editorials highlighted the sophistication of garments by showcasing them in exclusive and aspirational settings.

b.1.3 A Complex Structure

The very manufacturing process of grand liners reflected a distinctly Italian ability to synthesize diverse skills into a cohesive whole. Designers, craftsmen, builders, and artists collaborated in a harmonious chorus of expertise. Beyond major industries, these efforts involved artisan enterprises such as Cassina in furniture design and MITA in textiles, known for weaving sketches by prominent artists into its tapestries. Individual artists and decorators also contributed to this effort, including Lucio Fontana, who created mosaics for pool areas; Salvatore Fiume, whose *La leggenda d'Italia* adorned a ship's lounge; and Paolo De Poli, who crafted blue enamels for the Grand Bar. These achievements featured in the legendary – and tragically sunk – Andrea Doria vessel.

b.2 La Dolce Vita

At the dawn of the 1960s, the work of filmmakers such

as Federico Fellini and Michelangelo Antonioni captured the essence of Italy's economic boom and burgeoning consumer society. Their films portrayed a nation with a laidback yet decadent atmosphere, reimagined through the sophisticated language of a new wave of auteur cinema that achieved immense success in the United States. Fellini's *La dolce vita* (1960) became the emblem of an entire historical period. However, cinema was not the sole medium through which Italy projected its modern image and lifestyle abroad. From the novels by Cesare Pavese, Elio Vittorini, and Alberto Moravia to features in lifestyle magazines, Italy presented itself to the world as a refined and alluring country, profoundly transformed yet retaining its cultural charm.

b.2.1 A New Literary Realism

The reception of works by writers such as Cesare Pavese and Elio Vittorini, particularly among highbrow audiences, underscored the pervasiveness of Italy's image as a hub of modern, consumerist living in the United States. Despite their appreciated literary contributions under the Fascist regime – e.g., Pavese's 1932 translation of *Moby Dick*, and Vittorini's politically charged and controversial anthology *Americana* (1941) – neither achieved widespread fame in America, unlike contemporaries such as Carlo Levi or Alberto Moravia.

b.2.2 Pavese's and Vittorini's Italy

Pavese's *The Moon and the Bonfires* and Vittorini's *Conversation in Sicily* – published for the US market in the postwar years by Farrar, Straus & Young in 1953 and

New Directions in 1949, respectively–explored themes of a fraught return to one’s roots after the disappointments of modernity. Both novels eschewed overt expressionism, with Pavese, in particular, offering a nuanced and, at times, critical perspective on anti-Fascism. These complexities clashed with the simplistic, romanticized image of Italy that publishers sought to promote. As critic Leslie Fiedler noted in a pioneering essay in *The Kenyon Review* (1954), the cover of *The Moon and the Bonfires* «portrays not the world of the book but our latest legendary Italy, all *vino* and sex and red peppers» (1954).

b.2.3 Cinema, Society, and Hedonism

Fellini’s *La dolce vita* (1960), the fifth highest-grossing foreign film in US history, offered a modern perspective on Rome’s *Hollywood on the Tiber* era – a time of glamorous nightlife and celebrity culture spurred by the economic boom. Cinecittà Studios recreated a lively Via Veneto that reflected a hedonistic lifestyle shaped by selective appropriations of American cultural models of consumption brought to Italy during the Marshall Plan and the broader efforts to Americanize Italian society in the postwar period.

b.2.4 An Ambivalent Modernity

While *La dolce vita* introduced the image of a transformed Italy to international audiences, Fellini’s subsequent film *8½* (1963) achieved both critical and commercial success in the United States. Unlike its predecessor, *8½* explored modernity through its narrative form, cen-

tering on an existentially and creatively restless character. Together with Michelangelo Antonioni’s *existential trilogy* – *L’avventura* (1960), *La notte* (1961), and *L’eclisse* (1962) – these films reflected the ambivalent qualities of the lifestyle associated with Italy’s economic miracle.

b.2.5 The Myth of La Dolce Vita

The myth of Italy’s *Dolce Vita* was perpetuated by representations of daily life that reached the American public, as well as by idealized portrayals that overlooked the era’s social and political complexities. This myth was propagated through cultural products, including lifestyle magazines tailored to Italian American audiences (e.g., *Epoca* and *Divagando*), and contributions in US publications like *The New Yorker* and *Harper’s Bazaar*. For instance, the latter outlets romanticized Italian refinement, culture, and style, offering images of «handsome young Italians lounging around before dinner, beautifully dressed, drinking *americanos*» (Thielen 1948).

b.3 Transcultural Objects

The development of *Made in Italy* during the early postwar period involved more than creating a commercial label that added value to Italian products. It also entailed crafting a public narrative about Italian identity, built around symbols and imagery that captivated global audiences and redefined perceptions of the country. This process was integral to both nation-building–reshaping Italian identity–and nation-branding, which aimed to rehabilitate and elevate Italy’s image on the international stage, particularly within the vital US market.

It is no surprise that certain Italian brands became key drivers of this process as they became instrumental in elevating Italian products, design, and cultural models in the United States. Eventually, they also influenced American tastes, encouraging a shift from the outdated perception of Italy as a pre-modern country.

b.3.1 Innovation and Tradition

From food to fashion, design, and mechanical engineering, postwar Italian brands in the US were united by their ability to present products that blended innovation with tradition—a hallmark of the new Italian identity promoted by the country's political and economic leadership. Brands such as Motta, Buitoni, Ferragamo, Necchi, Piaggio, and Richard Ginori embraced American ideals of productivity while emphasizing their distinct capacity to create consumer goods with originality and quality, rooted in Italy's rich artisanal and artistic traditions. Thus, Italian brands became ambassadors of a modern manufacturing model, offering a sophisticated alternative to America's paradigm of mass production for mass consumption.

b.3.2 Out of This World

The export of Italian wines and spirits to the United States became a nodal point in a broader network of transatlantic economic, social, and cultural exchanges that redefined relations between the two countries. Through the consumption of products associated with a modern Italian lifestyle, these exchanges fostered a reciprocal modernization of identity practices in both Italy and the US. Leveraging the rise of a new *stile italiano* and the com-

mercial identity shaped by earlier North American campaigns, brands like Campari crafted advertising imagery to captivate the US market, establishing a foothold in the competitive liquor industry.

b.3.3 Cinema da bere

Italian cinema played a key role in shaping postwar US consumer culture, incorporating nationally branded objects such as bottles, glasses, posters, billboards, and verbal references to brands including Martini, Cinzano, Campari, and Carpano. These products appeared in iconic films such as Mario Monicelli's *Big Deal on Madonna Street* (1958) and Pietro Germi's *Divorce Italian Style* (1961). In some cases, American movies also featured Italian liquors and wines as “visual mediators” of transcultural exchange. One notable example is the Italian American co-production *It Started in Naples* (1960), directed by Melville Shavelson, which features a memorable scene depicting Clark Gable and Sophia Loren partaking of an aperitif—Kentucky whiskey for him and Cinzano vermouth for her.

A New Nation

The spaces and objects of everyday life became essential carriers of a modern, distinctly Italian way of living, inspiring new approaches to experiencing the world.

Italy's modernization efforts transformed its public and private spaces, reshaping daily routines and crafting an Italian identity that was recognizable beyond national borders. Architects, designers, authors, filmmakers, artisans, and manufacturers worked collectively to craft a new cultural and commercial image for Italy. By experimenting with materials and technologies and exploring their technical and formal possibilities, they contributed to a dual process: redefining the concept of "Italian-ness" for American audiences and translating Italian cultural and aesthetic sensibilities into forms accessible to new audiences. Spaces and objects played a central role in the dissemination of this new lifestyle. Whether featured in films or experienced directly, they suggested captivating and fashionable habits, practices, and sensibilities.

c.1 Living Spaces

Public spaces designed for collective use—such as commercial, sports, and transportation facilities—were especially influential in disseminating the image of a new Italian lifestyle in the United States.

c.1.1 Olivetti's Italy

The Olivetti brand, which came to be regarded as the epitome of Italian design, sets a perfect example of this process. Its showrooms, crafted by architects such as

BBPR, Leo Lionni, and Giorgio Cavaglieri, projected the essence of the signifier *Italy* while reinterpreting the nation's identity. American designers, such as the renowned Louis I. Kahn from the Olivetti Underwood in Harrisburg, and Charles Colbert, who created a showroom in Orlando in 1966, further developed Olivetti's vision. Similarly, Italian furniture and design objects were celebrated for their innovative qualities and functionality, their ability to seamlessly integrate into daily life, as well as for reflecting the advancement of the production processes.

c.1.2 Nervi's Italy

Pier Luigi Nervi became a symbol of Italian engineering in the United States, not only for his works but also for his books and the way he enveloped his public image in myth. Nervi represented the modernity pervading the Italian productive system. His projects conveyed the idea of a highly modern Italy, where advanced construction techniques – particularly in reinforced concrete – were successfully used. Simultaneously, continuity with the artistic and historical Italian heritage was maintained, as evidenced by the sophisticated forms of structural elements Nervi designed. He also played a pivotal role in transatlantic exchanges, thanks to his network of contacts and his projects, which involved people from both sides of the Atlantic and epitomized a forward-looking, innovative Italy.

c.1.3 The Contradictions of Modernity

Media representations of modern Italy were framed through contrasting lenses. Films such as *Roman Holiday*

offered idyllic and mythical depictions of the country, reflecting American cultural expectations. In contrast, other narratives presented the contradictions of Italy's economic and technological progress, including urban issues, and revealed how industrialization and consumerism were leading to depersonalization and a new individualism. The narratives and languages of Italian cinema allowed for the emergence of a "new Italy," one that was moving away from its archaic traditions and past flaws.

c.2 *The World of Things*

In the postwar period, Italy experienced a surge in creativity, with everyday objects becoming symbols of a renewed cultural identity. Designed for the Italian market and later exported to the US through a transatlantic infrastructure of media, businesses, and distribution networks, these objects carried both practical functions and symbolic meanings. This process contributed to the rise of the *Made in Italy* phenomenon, blending artisanal skills with technical innovation.

c.2.1 *Italian Mobility*

Products like the Vespa and Lambretta, introduced to the US market in the late 1940s, became more than mere symbols of Italy's industrial modernization. They represented a distinct Italian lifestyle. While engaging with American ideas of both physical and social mobility, they offered an added value: the concept of *the art of living*, or *saper vivere*, which assured their success and became an integral aspect of how the US perceived and understood Italy.

c.2.2 *Avant-Garde and Tradition*

Italian cinema played a crucial role in this cultural dialogue, reinterpreting traditional genres and showcasing Italy's unique voice in the US. During the 1960s, Italian films ventured—often through co-productions—into genres dominated by Hollywood, such as westerns and science fiction. Such an operation evinced, on the one hand, the craftsmanship and technical expertise for which Italian filmmakers were known and appreciated overseas, and on the other hand, the strength of a wide and well-established transatlantic network connecting the production system with the authors, creators, and crews.

A New Italian Renaissance

In the immediate postwar period, modernity in Italy entailed, first and foremost, overcoming its Fascist past. The nation's rebirth was rooted in new cultural references, which emphasized medieval and Renaissance heritage over the classical motifs associated with fascism, in order to foster the image of a democratic, modern Italy.

The absolute priority for the reconstruction of the country was rejoining the ranks of democratic nations and overcoming the legacy of fascism, even at the cost of forgetting the recent past. Industrial production was redesigned and promoted to become more appealing to the North American market, emphasizing an artistic and cultural heritage that deviated from the classical references of the Fascist era, instead drawing upon the traditions associated with the Middle Ages, the Renaissance, and the idealized figure of the *artisan-philosopher*. It is noteworthy that, in 1959, an official report by the Ministry of Foreign Trade attributed the origin of the slogan *Italian industrial renaissance* to an American commercial agency, Rosen, which provided consultancy services to Italian trade offices in the United States and some of the most important Italian export companies. Yet, it is difficult to ascertain the precise origin of the notion of a second Italian renaissance, which began to circulate in Italy in the immediate postwar period.

d.1 In a New Light

In the period following World War II, Italian cultural production was often described as the embodiment of a new

intellectual and artistic Renaissance in the United States. Such an image, associated with all domains of cultural production, contributed to the intellectual fervor of postwar Italy, creating a stark contrast between the country's self-fashioning around innovation and the representations of a pre-modern, rural, and authentic Italy depicted in the very novels that were framed within this Renaissance label, thus creating a false idea of discontinuity in the country's artistic production.

d.1.1 A Liberated Italy

Carlo Levi's *Christ Stopped at Eboli* (1947), Corrado Alvaro's *Man is Strong* (1948), Alberto Moravia's *The Woman of Rome* (1949), Giuseppe Marotta's *The Treasures of Naples* (1949), Dante Arfelli's *The Fifth Generation* (1953), Elio Vittorini's *The Red Carnation* (1952), and Romualdo Romano's *Scirocco* (1951) were among the novels that literary critics and journalists regarded as emblematic of the new Italian Renaissance. However, this narrative tended to create a false dichotomy between the Fascist and postwar eras, ignoring that many of these authors had worked during both periods. The emphasis on the intellectual rebirth of Italy and its liberation by the Allies gives an indication of the political reverberations that accompanied the dissemination of Italian culture in the United States.

d.1.2 Philosopher-Artists

Beyond literature, other forms of Italian art and culture were presented in a new light, highlighting the discontinuity with fascism and calling attention to otherwise neglected features, such as the closeness to the Renais-

sance world, especially in the conception of the philosopher-artist. These works were promoted and disseminated by a network that connected both the publishing world and the museums, bringing together diverse expertise. This is evidenced by some of the technical literature, such as Mario Dal Fabbro's texts, which spread modern Italian models by promoting *Do-It-Yourself* (DIY) in the field of furniture, and exhibitions such as *Twentieth Century Italian Art* at the Museum of Modern Art, which suggested a reinterpretation of Italian cultural and artistic history.

d.2 On Work and Labor

Following the conclusion of World War II, Italy underwent a period of rapid economic growth and industrialization. As Gio Ponti put it, the country's new identity and artistic and cultural growth were «considered from two distinct perspectives: a critical one and a labor-oriented one. The latter entails the examination of works and skills that serve as sources of prestige and value for the country, as well as of expressions of its vital capacities» (Ponti 1948). These elements collectively serve as the foundation for economic well-being, social stability, and democracy.

d.2.1 Art and Industry

The idea of a *new Italian Renaissance* was reinforced in the US through exhibitions and media portrayals that linked Italy's artistic rebirth to its industrial revival. For instance, *Italy at Work: Her Renaissance in Design Today*, a traveling exhibition held from 1950 to 1953, showcased Italian craftsmanship through furniture, textiles, and everyday objects, presenting them as reflections of the country's

modern identity. Similarly, in 1954, *Fortune* drew a relationship between the rebirth of Italian art and enterprises, reporting the country's industrial renaissance through the illustrations by some of its prominent artists.

d.2.2 Literature and Industry

Concurrently with the image of the Italian Renaissance that circulated in American public discourse, Italy also promoted itself as a highly modernized country, partly to counter the perception of premodernity and backwardness that, paradoxically, emerged from some of the cultural products that publicized Italy and Italian-ness in the United States. The US publishing market, for instance, favorably welcomed Paolo Volponi's fiction centered on life in the factory, beginning with *Memoriale* (1962), translated into English as *My Troubles Began* in 1964. Yet, Volponi's portrayal of industrial Italy was not flattering. The protagonist of the novel, Albino Saluggia, a veteran of the Second World War, soon discovers that his high expectations for the working class are not met, resulting in a growing sense of alienation and paranoia that leads to a conflictual relationship with his coworkers and, above all, with the higher-rank employees of his unnamed factory (based on the Olivetti factory in Ivrea, where Volponi himself worked at the time).

d.2.3 Botteghe Oscure

Despite its limited circulation, the magazine *Botteghe Oscure* (BO, 1948-1960) played a prominent role in promoting a *modernist* Italian literature. Through her international network of contacts, Marguerite Caetani, founder of the

magazine, wished to deprovincialize and introduce Italian authors into the Anglo-American scene. The heterogeneity of the texts published reflected the cultural vibrancy of postwar Italy, with works such as Natalia Ginzburg's *Valentino*, Vasco Pratolini's *Le ragazze di Sanfrediano*, and Carlo Cassola's *La casa di via Valadier*. *BO* also launched Guglielmo Petroni and contributed to the posthumous fame of Giuseppe Tomasi di Lampedusa. In the poetic field, Giorgio Caproni, Carlo Levi, Umberto Saba, and Pier Paolo Pasolini received positive reviews. Despite his absence, Giuseppe Ungaretti, Caetani's close collaborator on her earlier magazine *Commerce*, was praised as one of the protagonists of this period of rebirth, thus countering the opinion that early postwar poetry was already dead.

d.2.4 Publishing Houses

Italian publishing houses also strengthened transatlantic connections. The 1950s brought significant changes in the way the work of Italian authors was promoted and distributed in the US. Mondadori led the way, opening an office in New York in 1951, followed in 1964 by Rizzoli, which complemented its publishing efforts by engaging with the film industry through its subsidiary Cineriz. Since the 1940s, Einaudi had already established a strong network of contacts with American literary agents and translators relying on the mediation of external collaborators such as Renato Poggioli and Sanford J. Greenburger. These relationships became more systematic from the 1960s onwards. For instance, Italo Calvino's trip to the US (sponsored by the Ford Foundation) enabled him to build direct connections with American literary figures such as

Philip Roth and William Weaver, who would later become his translator.

d.2.5 Made in Italy: Fashion

In the 1950s, the development of light industry in Italy gave way to the growth of artisan workshops specializing in consumer goods, from furniture to clothing. During this period, Italian fashion—chiefly small ateliers based in Rome, such as Sorelle Fontana and Emilio Schuberth—made its mark in the United States. As the *Made in Italy* brand became synonymous with refinement and glamour, cinema contributed to promoting an Italian fashionable lifestyle. Films like Joseph L. Mankiewicz's *The Barefoot Contessa* (1954), an Italian American co-production, Luciano Emmer's *Three Girls from Rome* (1952), and Michelangelo Antonioni's *Le amiche* (1955) all featured costumes designed by the Fontana atelier to project the Italian elegance to international audiences.

d.2.6 Made in Italy: Furniture Design

The recovery of the Italian economy also relied on the export of Italian furniture. Max Ascoli envisioned this opportunity from the very end of the war. From New York, although in constant contact with Italy, Ascoli promoted the creation and financing of an artisanal Italian infrastructure to boost production, such as CADMA and CNA. In the United States, he advertised its products through ventures such as the *House of Italian Handicrafts*, a combined sales and exhibition space that allowed people to appreciate the qualities of Italian design in a coherent, curated setting.

Who We Are, Who We Were

In the two decades after World War II, the image of Italy seen from across the Atlantic was shaped by a tension between its imposing past and a present in transformation.

Italy found itself in a delicate balance between the rural, pre-industrial world it once was, and the new possibilities unleashed by the economic boom of the late 1950s. This relationship with tradition and history was both an asset and a challenge in the process of crafting a modern Italian identity on the global stage. On the one hand, Italy was perceived as lagging behind the industrialized Anglo-Saxon world; on the other, it embodied an often romanticized alternative temporality, offering a reassuring alternative to the rampant consumerism of the United States in the 1950s.

e.1 Public Spaces, Shared Lives

The dialogue between Italy and the United States took shape in both real and imagined spaces. Authors such as Ignazio Silone and Carlo Levi, along with the international success of *The Leopard*, brought to light Italy's stagnation and underdevelopment. At the same time, Giuseppe Ungaretti's celebrated visit to New York and the rise of Italian American gangster films underscored a yearning to reconnect with cultural roots and framed tradition as a counterbalance to the pressures of modernity. The emergence of a distinct and modern Italian American ethnic identity further transformed the perception of Little Italies, now idealized as vibrant hubs of community life. Meanwhile, inspired by the distinctiveness of Italian cities, American

urban planners began to rethink public spaces, emphasizing streets and squares as arenas for connection and exchange.

e.1.1 Fontamara

Ignazio Silone's *Fontamara* quickly gained traction in the US, with two American editions being published within a year of its 1933 release in Italy. The novel's unflinching portrayal of southern Italy's socio-economic struggles struck a chord with American readers, bolstered by Silone's reputation as an anti-Fascist thinker. Although the failures of fascism to improve the lives of the *cafoni* in Fontamara's fictional village remain implicit, they form a poignant undercurrent, much like in Carlo Levi's *Christ Stopped at Eboli* (1947). Levi's postwar bestseller, translated by Frances Frenaye (who had also worked on Silone's novels), offered a vivid and deeply moving depiction of life in the southern village of Gagliano. Both authors shaped an enduring image of Italy as a pre-modern land, an idea further solidified by academic studies such as Edward Banfield's *The Moral Basis of a Backward Society* (1958), which echoed and extended these portrayals in American popular discourse.

e.1.2 Ungaretti in the United States

Italy's decision not to participate in the highly modern and technology-driven 1964 New York World's Fair is an ironic coincidence, yet it did little to prevent the country from commanding attention. Between February and May 1964, Giuseppe Ungaretti was invited to Columbia University to teach a course on Leopardi and give lectures on his own *Canzone*, thus continuing the tradition of promoting Ital-

ian culture at Columbia, a legacy initiated by Giuseppe Prezzolini in 1923. On April 30, the Academy of American Poets hosted a poetry reading for Ungaretti at the Guggenheim Museum, a testament to his renown. During the event, Ungaretti recited his poems and listened to their English translations, recited by a number of distinguished poets, including Anthony Hecht, Galway Kinnell, Jack Marshall, Robert Lowell, Barbara Guest, William Meredith, and Stanley Kunitz. Ungaretti also visited the World's Fair, accompanied by Nando Sampietro, then editor of the Italian weekly *Epoca*. On this occasion, President Lyndon Johnson greeted *Epoca's* editorial delegation, which included Giorgio Mondadori, Gianfranco Cantini, and Natalia Danesi Murray.

e.1.3 The Leopard

Building on the global attention garnered by *Doctor Zhivago* (published in Italy in 1957), Giangiacomo Feltrinelli published Giuseppe Tomasi di Lampedusa's *The Leopard* in 1958. Prior to its translation into English by Archibald Colquhoun for Pantheon Books in 1960, an excerpt from the novel – a stark depiction of the enduring stagnation of southern Italy's aristocracy – was first previewed in *Botteghe Oscure* in 1958 (*Quad. XXI*). Three years later, Luchino Visconti adapted it into a cinematic masterpiece, bringing the story to international acclaim.

e.1.4 Il Meridione in Cinema

From the 1950s onwards, Italian cinema turned its lens toward a rural, superstitious, and backward Italy, producing films that explored a South untouched by the transforma-

tions of the so-called economic miracle. These works often focused on the moral and legal struggles faced by women in archaic southern societies. The films' ability to engage with Italy's history and culture enabled them to captivate international audiences.

e.1.5 The Gangster Movie

Connections to the past took on a virtuous, identity-defining role in efforts to portray the Italian community in the United States and its folklore. The gangster movie genre, which originated in the 1930s, underwent a reimagining and revival in the early 1970s at the hands of Italian American directors such as Francis Ford Coppola and Martin Scorsese. Their films depicted or reconstructed spaces that showcased the customs and traditions of a community deeply tied to its heritage. This is particularly evident in *The Godfather* (1972) and *Mean Streets* (1973), where the streets of Italian American neighborhoods and the private spaces of their characters become central aesthetic and dramatic elements.

e.1.6 Little Italies

Through successive waves of migration, elements of the Italian city began to appear in US urban centers, forming distinct microcosms. Although these communities gradually assimilated, they retained their own codes and mores. While at the start of the century, portrayals of Italian neighborhoods had often taken the form of exposés or investigative journalism aimed at highlighting the supposed inability of southern Italians to adapt to modern urban spaces, by the 1950s, the social structure and cultural ge-

ography of these enclaves primarily captured the interest of American sociologists. Scholars such as Jane Jacobs, William Foote Whyte, and Herbert J. Gans employed these communities as case studies to explore the impact of Italian customs on American urban life.

e.1.7 Contrasts and Contradictions

The Italian city, emphasizing public and shared spaces, became increasingly visible to American audiences in the 1940s. Many experienced it firsthand during the war or as tourists, aided by strengthening ties and travel connections between the two countries. Others encountered it indirectly through magazines, where prominent commentators explored the tension between Italy's tradition and modernization. Among them was Costantino Nivola, an artist and graphic designer who had migrated during the Fascist years, whose sketches highlighted the contradictions between Italy's past and present. Italian American author John Fante also wrote about Italy, weaving a narrative characterized by a sense of wonder shaped by the interplay between his Italian roots and American upbringing.

e.1.8 The Public City

Interest in Italian urban spaces was further documented through exhibitions and publications that celebrated their unique qualities while also exposing the fragility and challenges posed by Italy's modernization process. Roberto Brambilla's exhibition, *Art and Landscape of Italy: Too Late To Be Saved* (1972), presented Italian streets and squares – alive with pedestrian activity, commerce, and shared services – as models for American cities. These spaces were

portrayed as urban living rooms, ideal venues for showcasing the best of civic life.

Books and exhibitions curated by Bernard Rudofsky in the context of the *International Program of Circulating Exhibition* – such as *Streets for People* (1969) and *Architecture Without Architects* (1964) – also contributed to reevaluating public spaces in American urban planning. This influence was evident in New York City's 1961 Zoning Resolution, which encouraged the inclusion of open spaces in the urban core by offering developers additional building allowances for projects that incorporated them.

e.2 Craftsmanship as a Resource

Craftsmanship became a hallmark of Italian identity in the United States. Collaborations between figures such as Josef Singer and Gio Ponti exemplify the prestige of Italian furniture design, while Carlo De Carli's work and the widespread appeal of Richard Ginori's ceramics celebrated Italy's seamless blend of technological innovation and artisanal traditions. This interplay between modernity and tradition also extended to fashion, as evidenced by partnerships between Italian designers and major American department stores, and to cinema, with Cinecittà symbolizing Italy's ability to combine artisanal excellence with large-scale production.

e.2.1 Between Craftsmanship and Industry

After the war, Italy re-entered the US market boasting a rich tradition of craftsmanship, particularly in the realms of furniture and decorative arts, key sectors of the emerging *Made in Italy* brand. Italian artisanal techniques became

synonymous with quality and uniqueness, as seen in Josef Singer's collaborations with prominent Italian designers, including Gio Ponti. A similar marketing strategy was employed by Dino Levi, an importer of antique furniture, who also allowed US professionals to experience Italian artisanship and connect directly with its craftsmen and manufacturers.

e.2.2 Singer and Carlo de Carli

The sketches in Carlo De Carli's *Work Diary* illustrate the genesis of his furniture designs, which frequently involved adapting existing Cassina pieces to meet the specific requirements detailed by Singer. Trade magazines and newspapers promoted these products by emphasizing their Italian character, conveyed through their designers' names and references to Italian history.

e.2.3 Made in Italy

The promotion of Richard Ginori's ceramics provided a platform to highlight how Italian companies skillfully combined modern «machinery and production methods» with the originality of their artistic heritage. Similarly, magazines advertising Italian fashion – sold in major department stores like I. Magnin, Neiman Marcus, and Saks – frequently referenced historical and artistic settings, ranging from the Colosseum to the streets of ancient Ostia. These campaigns also spotlighted the work of designers such as Emilio Schuberth and Emilio Pucci, as well as the expertise of seamstresses, artisans, and designers who balanced artistic innovation with North American markets' demands for ready-made products.

e.2.4 Hollywood on the Tiber

Cinecittà Studios became a hub of American film productions abroad in the postwar era. Nicknamed *Hollywood on the Tiber*, the Roman studio district hosted numerous American blockbusters and Italian-American co-productions throughout the 1950s and 1960s. Globally recognized as a center of artisanal expertise, Cinecittà functioned as a vast and efficient workshop – bringing together technicians, prop makers, operators, makeup artists, costume designers, and set decorators – and provided American cinema with high-quality infrastructure and skilled labor at a significantly lower cost compared to productions based in California.

Classical Reflections

The image of Italy in the United States is shaped by the relationship with its history and heritage—a past remarkably rich in cultural, artistic, and political expressions.

Italy's history attracted significant attention, and historians and designers probed it accordingly during their extended stays, often funded by scholarships. Their studies provided opportunities to reflect on fundamental principles, exploring themes and formal approaches through texts, drawings, sketches, and photographs that examined, codified, and communicated Italy's historical legacy to the public.

Americans admired the seemingly light and disenchanted way Italians approached their cultural heritage while intervening to allow modern life to flourish. Italians' ability to work alongside existing structures—making deliberate, minimal interventions while simultaneously emphasizing elements at risk of being lost—was seen as a rare and distinctive skill. For US observers, history pervades Italian life without overwhelming it, and Italians possess the rare and distinctive ability to engage with their past.

f.1 Epic Traditions

The United States' attraction to Italy is partly rooted in a mythical past, embodied by the country's rich cultural heritage. Art, architecture, literature, and cinema thus became sources of inspiration and subjects of study for America, pointing to a process of cultural exchanges that transcends mere influence to foster a genuine dialogue across time and space.

f.1.1 Architecture and History

Italy is not confined to the lens of postwar recovery or contemporary struggles; instead, its vast and extraordinary cultural heritage consistently commands attention. This patrimony, shaped by contributions from visual and plastic arts, architecture, literature, and cinema, represents a cornerstone of Italy's global image. Americans observed, studied, and documented it, as evidenced by the sketches of architect Louis I. Kahn. These efforts catalogued, preserved, and valorized Italian culture through exhibitions, publications, lectures, and university courses across the United States.

f.1.2 Dante in North American Literature

In the literary realm, the fascination with Dante—a symbol of Italian identity that migrants from the *Bel Paese* had embraced since the first half of the century—is legitimized both by popular discourse and high culture. More or less explicit intertextual references appear in Lawrence Ferlinghetti's *A Coney Island of the Mind* (1958), in the activities of the Dante Society, in academic journals like *Italian Quarterly*, and in individual poems of American authors, including John Updike, who places Dante at the heart of his exploration of the humanities. America's affective investment in Dante is also evident in Ezra Pound's desire in the 1960s to produce a volume on the Florentine poet with Vanni Scheiwiller (never published and recently recovered by Corrado Bologna and Lorenzo Fabiani), as well as in John Ciardi's ambitious project to translate *The Divine Comedy* between 1949 and 1970—an English version that remains widely read and disseminated.

today – and in Paolo Milano's best-selling volume *The Portable Dante* (1947).

f.2 Within Myth

As Ernesto N. Rogers has observed, Italy's creative process is inherently tied to the actualization of its past, with classical traditions serving as continuous sources of inspiration for the cultural, artistic, and industrial production of both countries. This dialogue between the ancient and the modern is explicitly manifested in the promotional material commissioned by Italian government agencies in the United States, as well as in restoration and redevelopment projects for iconic Italian sites and in urban reinterpretations of Italian classical motifs on the other side of the Atlantic. Similarly, in the realm of cinema, new genres elaborate on classical myths, and literature explores the contradictions of Classical Antiquity, using them as metaphors to critique contemporary US society.

f.2.1 From the Tree of Italy

The poster *From the Tree of Italy*, dating back to the mid-1950s, was commissioned by Lucia Autorino Salemmme of the Italian Embassy in the United States and printed by Charles L'Episcopo, the Italian American entrepreneur behind the magazine *Divagando*. It portrays Italy as an ancient tree with young sprouts, represented by historical figures – artists, scientists, politicians, and writers – who have made the country the «center of the Western world for three millennia». (Salemmme 1955)

f.2.2 Preserving and Building

Italian postwar restoration efforts garnered significant attention. They included the reconstruction of bomb-damaged landmarks such as La Scala in Milan and the Santa Trinità Bridge in Florence, recovery projects such as BBPR's work in Milan's historic center, and modernization endeavours that reimagined historical elements in contemporary interiors – such as Franco Albini's redesign of the Casa Bigli. These undertakings were closely studied and, in some cases, repurposed in the United States. A notable example is Aldo Giurgola's redesign of Philadelphia townhouses, which drew inspiration from Italian architectural approaches, reinterpreting their formal and typological features for American urban contexts.

f.2.3 The Peplum Genre

The peplum, a series of epic and mythological films set in biblical contexts or the eras of Ancient Greece and Roman civilization, was among the most representative film genres of the 1950s and 1960s. In the postwar period, the revival of Hollywood film production in Italy led to a series of historical epics, beginning with Mervyn LeRoy's *Quo Vadis* (1951) and extending to Joseph L. Mankiewicz's *Cleopatra* (1963). During those same years, Italian cinema also ventured into the *sword and sandal* genre, producing highly successful films both domestically and abroad, often tailored specifically for international audiences. Federico Fellini's *Satyricon* (1969) is a singular example within this landscape. Loosely based on Petronius' *Satyricon*, the film became an instant cult classic in the United

States, reimagining Classical Rome through Fellini's surreal and timeless vision, transforming the pre-Christian city into a fantastical, otherworldly realm.

f.2.4 The Beat Generation and Ancient Rome

Poets associated with the Beat Generation, such as Robert Duncan, Lawrence Ferlinghetti, Allen Ginsberg, and Gregory Corso, were drawn to the grandeur and contradictions of Ancient Rome. Even prior to their meeting with Fernanda Pivano – the main mediator between the Beat movement and Italy – these poets expressed a strong fascination with Ancient Rome and its contradictions. Beyond admiring the architectural and artistic value of Ancient Rome's ruins, within the context of the United States' rise to global dominance, the Roman Empire and the corruption that led to its decline served as a cautionary tale for these poets, who were critical of US foreign policy and domestic affairs.

Transatlantic Trajectories: An Atlas on Display¹

Gennaro Postiglione, Francesca Serrazanetti

Exhibiting and Representing: The Digital Space and the Experience of Architecture

When discussing exhibitions – particularly those that include architecture as a discipline – a fundamental distinction must first be made: namely, between exhibitions that display material objects (as art exhibitions) and those that construct narratives around themes, knowledge, or artifacts that cannot be transported into the physical space of a museum. The latter – such as scientific exhibitions or those based on intangible heritage – have, over the past century, explored a variety of display strategies, increasingly relying on narrative devices – often digital ones – to appropriately convey the presence of *absent* objects. Architecture aligns more closely with this type of exhibition: although it consists of physical structures, these cannot be brought into the museum, which necessitates exhibiting them *in absence*, through their *simulacra* or the stories they embody. This has given rise, in curatorial and exhibition practices, to a dialogical relationship between *presentation* and *representation* of the exhibited object².

This narrative need – often supported by technology – has been further transformed by the digital revolution and the resulting changes in content consumption habits³. Digital technology has not only further established itself as a tool for the visualization and representation of *absent* themes and objects, but it has also enabled new modes of production and dissemination of exhibitions themselves. In recent years, the use of digital platforms allowing

visitors to experience the real architectural space through a curatorial guide has been particularly utilized and valued. Within the relationship between architectural simulacra (representations and process materials displayed in the museum gallery) and actual architectural artifacts in the urban space, many applications and websites have guided visitors from the museum environment to the external reality, activating a direct dialogue between the two dimensions of *representation* and *presentation* of the architectural object.

A recent example – among many developed over the last decades, sometimes even defining open-air museum routes with a lasting approach – is *Anything Goes? Berlin Architecture in the 1980s* (Berlinische Galerie, 2021), which offered several itineraries through the German capital accompanied by photographic images and audio insights⁴. Digital platforms have also increasingly served as representational spaces for curating and enhancing archives, making them accessible remotely from their physical location. Numerous programs and institutions now require or encourage online exhibitions via internet platforms, social networks, apps, or podcasts.

An example are the calls launched by the Canadian Centre for Architecture in Montreal addressed to for young curators (active since 2010), which invite proposals with innovative models that contribute to contemporary architectural discourse. Here, curating is considered a «tool to foster ideas, to question relevant positions, to introduce new research themes, and to critique current modalities», with the goal of promoting original and impactful thinking⁵.

Like all methodological and paradigmatic transformations, online exhibitions demand a specific mindset and cannot simply be a transposition of physical displays. «Digital heritage is not just about preserving the past with new tools, but about reshaping the museum's relationship with its audience», said Ross Parry, a key figure in digital museum studies. He views online exhibitions as a transformation of public engagement (Parry 2007): being fully accessible, they align with the idea of democratizing knowledge and fostering broader cultural participation, which also requires rethinking their formulation and design.

Online Exhibitions as Research Tools

Online exhibitions have thus gained increasing importance in the early decades of the twenty-first century, establishing themselves as a useful tool for critical reflection and curatorial experimentation, as well as one of the research fields in the renewed curatorial challenges of our century (Watson 2021). The forms they have taken are diverse: from highly interactive ones to those more akin to publications, from those that reinterpret the concept of the archive to curatorial projects defined as collections of digital artistic experiences⁶.

While acknowledging their variety, three main features define their identity: accessibility through interactive formats, digital experimentation of the exhibition languages, and dissemination beyond physical borders on a global scale.

Two misconceptions, however, should be clarified from the outset: the first is that the online exhibition does not in

any way replace the materiality of a physically accessible exhibition – an occasion for encounter and one that plays a social role far beyond that of mere cultural consumption (Witcomb 2007). Rather, they serve transmission, archiving, and transnational and transdisciplinary knowledge enhancement.

And this brings us to the second clarification: the online exhibition is most effective as a tool for presenting immaterial content, or content that cannot be displayed within the physical constraints of an exhibition space, whose representation can thus be easily conveyed (and enhanced) through digital means. In this sense, the digital exhibition differs from online art viewing platforms such as Google Arts & Culture, which – while offering an innovative opportunity to engage with the world's artistic heritage – risk turning the experience into more of a social media – like scroll than a conscious artistic encounter, thereby reducing and oversimplifying critical interpretation.

In the context of research, the digital exhibition thus becomes an increasingly valuable tool for disseminating results beyond the boundaries of academia, reaching not only scholars but also general enthusiasts. By enabling multi-layered engagement – allowing users to navigate through images, audio and video content, or in-depth textual analysis – online exhibitions become tools for *core sampling* within academic research. They effectively serve as critical (curatorial) readings that connect archival materials from diverse sources across disciplines. Architectural historian Jean-Louis Cohen defined the exhibition as «a research tool for the history of architecture and a narrative device for making that history known»

(Cohen 1999), suggesting that exhibitions can influence research both by providing access to documentation and communication and by offering opportunities for conducting research itself.

In recent decades, exhibitions that have played a fundamental role in historiographical research have multiplied. This is evidenced by the growing involvement of historians, universities, and researchers in the role of curators; by exhibition catalogues as significant research publications; and by the increasing investment of research centers in residency programs for researchers, research initiatives, and conferences aimed at gathering material and shaping exhibitions. In this perspective, the online exhibition emerges as one of the tools that is not only useful for conducting research but also for disseminating its outcomes. Referring to the disciplinary field of architecture, an additional element should be noted – one that was only briefly mentioned above: the inherent impossibility of exhibiting the architectural artifact itself within a museum space, and the long-standing debate on the most appropriate ways to represent it. In this regard, digital exhibitions make it possible to overcome traditional spatial limitations, providing universal access to content otherwise tied to specific locations: three-dimensional models, technical drawings, documentary videos, and immersive tours of buildings and projects – tools for representing architecture *in absence* – are, in this sense, particularly well-suited for online presentation.

Virtual platforms offer architects and curators a space for narrative and multimedia experimentation. Online exhibitions enable the combination of heterogeneous materials

(renderings, photographs, sketches, theoretical texts) in interactive formats that transform the visitor from a passive observer into an active user. A significant example is the platform of the Canadian Centre for Architecture (CCA), which offers digital content related to exhibitions that not only extend their reach but also reorganize and reinterpret design archives from new critical perspectives⁷. Architecture thus becomes the subject of a fluid and layered narrative, capable of exploring both formal logics and the social and environmental implications of the project.

Finally, digital exhibitions promote global knowledge sharing and a more inclusive, interconnected design culture. Especially during the COVID-19 pandemic, many institutions – such as the Venice Architecture Biennale – have experimented with hybrid or fully online formats, demonstrating the resilience and adaptability of the cultural sector. The 2021 edition, curated by Hashim Sarkis, integrated digital content to keep international dialogue alive and to expand the exhibition's program and the debate it generated across multiple dimensions, offering access to interviews, exhibition materials, and virtual tours of the national pavilions⁸.

The attempt to situate architectural discourse within a broader interdisciplinary, pluralist context – linking diverse voices and practices – is a hallmark of this approach: architecture becomes a lens within a prismatic body of knowledge and a kaleidoscopic view of reality. The transversal nature of the online exhibition, as described so far (a place of exchange, a collective of disciplines and geographically distant locations, and an

opportunity to organize and structure the content of a research project), therefore seems particularly suitable not only to narrate a project like *Transatlantic Transfers* but also to define the framework of the possible trajectories outlined by the research.

Transatlantic Transfers: an exhibition (and an Atlas) starting from the research

The *Transatlantic Transfers* exhibition represents the culminating moment of a research project aimed at rediscovering and re-narrating the fundamental role that Italian culture played in shaping the American postwar imagination. From an interdisciplinary perspective, the project has highlighted a dynamic network of influences, exchanges, and symbolic appropriations between Italy and the United States, bringing visibility to a largely unexplored yet crucial history for understanding the construction of lifestyles, tastes, and social identities in the American context and in the broader frame of global modernity. The premises and objectives of the research are fully accessible on the website and in the texts accompanying the exhibition, to which readers are referred for further insight. What this contribution seeks to explore, instead, starting from those premises, is the functionality – highlighting both advantages and limitations – of the online exhibition format.

The intention to shed light on the network of relationships that connected Italian and American cultural histories throughout the twentieth century links *Transatlantic Transfers* to the idea of an *open, multilayered atlas*, accessible by theme, discipline, time period, and more. The thematic organization of the online exhibition seems to

support this approach, offering possible pathways for engagement and multiple perspectives on the research content. In this sense, the exhibition is closely tied to (and perhaps even more valuable when used in conjunction with) another digital tool developed by the project: the *Atlas*⁹, which gathers, categorizes, and interrelates the content identified and archived by the various Research Units (and thus disciplines) involved in the project.

By collecting the individual vectors of transatlantic exchange into an archive organized primarily by categories (people, media, events, objects) and time periods (1949-1955, 1956-1960, 1961-1965, 1966-1972), the *Atlas* offers fully open and transversal navigation, with entries that include detailed information and references for each item. Building on this collection, the exhibition takes a further step: it offers thematic pathways that cut across content, disciplines, and historical periods, enhancing the transversal and transdisciplinary nature of the project.

Through archival materials, design objects, architectural projects, fashion, literary works, films, and advertising images, the exhibition narrates the emergence of a modern and recognizable *Italian style*, which gained international visibility precisely through a dense infrastructure of cultural, political, and economic exchanges between the two countries. The exhibition highlights the crucial role of certain iconic figures – writers, artists, filmmakers, architects, designers, intellectuals – who conveyed, along with their work, a distinctive aesthetic. But it also brings into focus the vectors of transmission (exchange programs, travel, newspapers, advertising) and the ways in which this style was appropriated in shaping the identity of a cosmopolitan

and culturally sophisticated American middle class. From its curatorial concept onward, the exhibition is conceived as an open-ended device, designed not to tell a single, linear story, but to unfold a multiplicity of trajectories, perspectives, and connections. Each section – like each object, document, image, or quotation – can be read on its own or as part of a broader constellation, capable of bringing into dialogue different disciplines, adjacent or distant historical periods, domains of high culture and material culture, official iconographies and popular representations.

The exhibition does not propose a single point of view; rather, it offers the visitor the opportunity to build their own path, navigating the materials based on personal interests and affinities. In this sense, *Transatlantic Transfers* adopts an inclusive and accessible curatorial method: the thematic cores present themselves as open, non-hierarchical maps that allow for layered readings – historical, aesthetic, social, affective – capable of engaging both researchers and a broader audience.

The exhibition platform thus invites visitors to retrace the often invisible trajectories of objects, images, ideas, and cultural products that crossed the Atlantic – frequently transforming along the way. The result is a mosaic of cross-contaminations and reinterpretations, where Italy is not merely a symbol of tradition or folklore, but a modernist laboratory, a creative workshop, a generator of new forms for a changing society.

As already noted, the project's interdisciplinary approach connects cultural, literary, social, artistic, and cinematic history with that of architecture and design.

This methodology brings together knowledge and practices rarely explored in tandem in critical reflections on U.S. – Italy cultural relations. Knowledge production and circulation, ideas and policies, international relations, material and academic culture, publishing, art, literature, and architecture all form an interconnected system.

This interdisciplinary character is central to both the research and the exhibition. The link between the exhibition and the Atlas allows, for example, a transversal reading of Made in Italy through advertising's role in conveying Italian identity to the U.S. While ads in the Atlas are presented objectively with sources, the exhibition offers a critical narrative connecting sources and disciplines¹⁰.

The *atlas-based* structure – rooted in the principles of cultural geography and the cartography of ideas (Crang 1998) – reflects the complexity of the phenomenon under investigation: the relationship between Italy and the United States in the postwar period is not a linear story of one-way influences, but a dynamic network of exchanges, rewritings, appropriations, desires, and intersecting visions. It is precisely in line with this perspective – conceived as a premise of the research and confirmed throughout its development – that the format of the on-line exhibition, open and navigable like an atlas, proves particularly well-suited.

Built around the hypothesis that, between the late 1940s and early 1970s, Italy was a powerful source of aesthetic, symbolic, and material models that gained a prominent place in the imagination of the emerging American middle class, the critical interpretation offered by the exhibition becomes a vehicle for content that is significant not only

from a historical standpoint, but also in terms of contemporary relevance. At a time when the boundaries between the local and the global are constantly being redefined, this exhibition also serves as an opportunity to reflect on the political and cultural value of transnational aesthetics and the non-singular definition of the concept of *identity*.

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Notes

1. This text accompanies the publication of the online exhibition *Transatlantic Transfers*, the outcome of the research project of the same name, funded with the support of MIUR – PRIN 2017. Both authors contributed to the writing of the article: Gennaro Postiglione is primarily responsible for the drafting of Section 1; Francesca Serrazanetti for Section 2; Section 3 is the result of shared discussion and writing.
2. These topics have been addressed by both authors of this essay in other publications to which reference is made and from which some of the considerations presented here are derived (Postiglione 2018; Serrazanetti 2014). For the same topics, see the collective volumes: Arrhenius et al. 2014, Pelkonen et al. 2015.
3. In the field of architecture, this transformation is extensively analyzed by Mario Carpo (Carpo 2017), in a text useful for understanding how digital technology has transformed not only architectural design but also its communication and representation.
4. Audiowalk-App for the exhibition “Anything Goes?”, Berlinische Galerie, Landesmuseum für Moderne Kunst, Fotografie und Architektur, 2021: <https://berlinische-galerie.de/digital/anything-goes/> (accessed on April 20, 2025).
5. CCA, Emerging Curator REsidency Program: <https://www.cca.qc.ca/en/77873/emerging-curator-residency-program> (accessed on April 20, 2025).
6. Some examples are available online: *12 Sunsets. Exploring Ed Ruscha's Archive*, an interactive website that allows exploration of thousands of photographs of Sunset

- Boulevard (LA) taken by the artist Ed Ruscha between 1965 and 2007 (Getty Research Institute, 2020): <https://12sunsets.getty.edu/map/1985?d=0.42256>; *Bauhaus: Building the New Artist*, an online exhibition about the history of the Bauhaus conceived in tandem with the gallery exhibition, curated by M. Casciato, G. Fox, Gary, K. Rochester (Getty Research Institute, 2019): https://www.getty.edu/research/exhibitions_events/exhibitions/bauhaus/new_artist/; the online exhibitions of the National Museum of Women in the Arts: <https://nmwa.org/whats-on/exhibitions/online/>; *1000 Scores. Pieces for Here, Now & Later*, a project by Helgard Haug, David Helbich, and Cornelius Puschke containing digital tracks for “performative exercises” created by various artists: <https://1000scores.com> (accessed on April 20, 2025).
7. Among the various examples, see the content related to the exhibition *A Section of Now*, part of the research project *Catching Up With Life* (2021-2022), <https://www.cca.qc.ca/en/events/77949/catching-up-with-life> (accessed April 20, 2025).
 8. Meetings on Architecture. Expanded Programme (Biennale di Architettura, Venezia 2021): <https://www.la-biennale.org/en/architecture/2021/meetings-architecture> (accessed on April 20, 2025).
 9. <https://transatlantictransfers.polimi.it/it/atlas/> (accessed on April 20, 2025).
 10. See, in this regard, the entries tagged *#advertising* in the online Atlas, as well as the curated pathway through advertisements that defined “*A Mix of Innovation and Tradition*” in the *Transcultural Objects* category of the *Lifestyle* section of the online exhibition.

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Curators

Marta Aversa is an architect with a PhD in Interior Architecture and Exhibition Design. She is an assistant professor at the DASTu, Polytechnic of Milan, where she teaches for the Architecture, Built Environment, Interiors master's degree. Her didactic and research activities focus on interiors' meaning and methods, exploring contemporary and historical projects, designing housing in marginal contexts, and reusing heritage. She is part of the research group *Transatlantic Transfers. The Italian presence in post war America 1949-1972*.

Among her publications: *Onore al lavoro. Gli interni delle fabbriche*, 2021; *The Italian Presence in Post-war America, 1949-1972. Architecture, Design, Fashion. Architetture, interni e oggetti nel passaggio attraverso l'Atlantico*, 2023; *Ambassadors of Italy: Italian Transatlantic Ocean Liners to the United States, 1946 - 1958*, Italian American Review 2024; *Transatlantic Transfers. Tools and methods for an integrated approach*, Cadernos Pro-arq 2024.

Gioele Cristofari is a postdoctoral researcher at the University of Turin. His research mainly focuses on Italian literature of the 17th and 20th centuries. He is author of the monographs *Il canzoniere smembrato. Le Poesie del disamore di Cesare Pavese* (Edizioni dell'Orso, 2021) and *Cesare Pavese politico* (Quodlibet, 2025), and of the critical edition of the novel *Il Fuoco*, a part of the Edizione Nazionale delle Opere di Gabriele d'Annunzio (Il Vittoriale degli Italiani, 2024). He is a member of the editorial boards of *Archivio d'Annunzio*, *Enthymema* and *Letteratura e dialetti*.

Stefano Morello is Assistant Director for Digital Projects at the American Social History Project/Center for Media and Learning of the CUNY Graduate Center. His research combines digital and traditional methods to investigate the infrastructure and the transnational reverberations of American popular and unpopular culture. Stefano's public-facing projects include the East Bay Punk Digital Archive, The Beats in/and Italy, and The Lung Block: A New York City Slum and Its Forgotten Italian Immigrant Community, among other digital publication and archival recovery endeavors. He is also a co-founding editor of *JAm It! (Journal of American Studies in Italy)*.

Matteo Santandrea is a Research Fellow at Roma Tre University and a Visiting Professor at the University of Teramo. His research primarily focuses on the representation of urban space and socio-cultural dynamics in Italian cinema of the 1970s. He has published the books *È stata Roma. La criminalità capitolina dal «poliziottesco» a Suburra* (Rubbettino, 2019) and *Paesaggi del crimine. Milano, Roma, Napoli nel crime film italiano: 1966-1980* (Marsilio, 2024), in addition to essays and contributions in peer-reviewed journals and edited volumes. He is a member of the editorial boards of *Cinema e Storia. Rivista di studi interdisciplinari* and *Imago. Studi di cinema e media* and is part of the organizational board of the Palladium Film Festival - CineMaOltre.

Marta Zonca is a PhD student in English Literature at the University of Eastern Piedmont (Vercelli). Her research focuses on accounts of British travellers to northern European countries in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century. She was a member of the research unit at the University of Eastern Piedmont for the PRNN Antiracist Pedagogies project. In 2023, she translated Ugandan poet Susan Kiguli's poems published in *Terre che piangono* (2023), presented at the International Civil Poetry Festival in Vercelli.

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