

**Barbara Faedda**, *From Da Ponte to the Casa Italiana*, Columbia University Press, New York, 2017, pp. 90

Since its construction in 1927 the neo-Renaissance palazzo called *Casa Italiana*, located on Amsterdam Avenue in New York, has been the most important expression of the Italian presence on the Columbia University campus. Celebrating the *Casa's* ninetieth anniversary, Barbara Faedda has written a beautiful book. She has used archival sources and unpublished documentation to recount the story of the individuals, Italian and American, who contributed to the formation of Columbia University's rich tradition of Italian studies. Useful appendices embellish the volume with additional information. Photos and images of the era enrich the book, which also prompted a permanent exhibition that can be admired inside *Casa Italiana*, re-evoking an important past.

This book sheds new light on Italy's historical and contemporary role on the international cultural scene: the role of food and Italian cuisine in particular, as an element of identity and contact between cultures. It would be too long to cite the abundant literature on the stories and the contributions of Italian immigrants to their countries of destination, and in particular the United States, but Faedda's book highlights a particular feature, namely the history of one of the most important cultural institutions, *Casa Italiana*, and the role of Italian culture. The

book is a refined and timely portrayal of the protagonists who, over the years, contributed to the creation and life of the *Casa*. The author outlines the events and relationships, the interweaving of the various subjects, among whom there stand out prominent names of Italian, and American, history and culture.

This research work not only reconstructs the history of an important institution but has the advantage of bringing to the fore the stories of Italian emigrants and exiles at a time when emigration, a phenomenon congenital to humanity, has resumed in an incessant and painful way, even if the main protagonists today are above all Africans, for whom the “America” of the twenty-first century is Europe.

The founding father of Italian studies at Columbia University was Lorenzo Da Ponte. Da Ponte was born in Italy in 1749; he was Jewish by birth but became Catholic when his family converted; as Faedda writes, he changed his name from Emanuele Conegliano. After being banished from the Republic of Venice, Da Ponte moved several times until he found a job as poet and librettist at the Austrian court. There he authored libretti for Mozart’s *Don Giovanni*, *The Marriage of Figaro*, and *Così fan tutte*, writing prolifically until the death of the king, his principal supporter. He then went to London, where he remained until debt and bankruptcy forced him to cross the Atlantic. He arrived in the United States in 1805, finally reuniting with his partner Ann Celestine Grahl, who had immigrated earlier with her relatives.

Da Ponte landed in a New York that was a flourishing commercial city, one of the most promising ports in the United States, and already a patchwork of people and nationalities.

At the time, Da Ponte was a rare Italian in the influx of German, Irish, British, and Scandinavian immigrants. The first notable influx of foreigners in the early nineteenth century, in fact, originated primarily in northern Europe; massive Italian immigration did not begin until the late nineteenth century during the “new immigration”, which was the largest wave of European arrivals in American history and consisted

mostly of Jewish people, Slavs and Italians. According to Mark Choate,<sup>1</sup> between 1880 and 1915, 13 million Italians emigrated to North and South America, Europe, and the rest of the Mediterranean, the largest emigration from any country in the history of the world.

Lorenzo and his fellow Italian immigrants of the early 1800s were patriots, political refugees, and exiles; people skilled in agriculture, manufacturing, or the arts; and explorers and geographers.

In 1825, after years of teaching privately and running business enterprises, Da Ponte was offered a teaching position at Columbia, on terms that Faedda documents, transcribing a letter found in the Columbia University archives. Teaching, however, was not Da Ponte's original calling: his passions were music and books. In 1830 he opened a bookstore in New York, as he had decades before in London. Detailed records show what books passed through Lorenzo Da Ponte's hands into libraries at Columbia and elsewhere in New York City. Da Ponte's attempts to introduce Italian books, literature, and culture into America were reported in a 1906 article in *La Bibliofilia* (the Italian journal on the history of printing, founded and directed by Leonardo Olschki). The Columbia University library was one of the main recipients of Da Ponte's books. He died, almost 90 years old, in 1838 at his home at 91 Spring Street. Da Ponte was, as Faedda writes, perhaps the most colorful and fascinating professor in Columbia's nearly three-hundred-year history. After him, Columbia offered the Italian teaching position to Eleuterio Felice Foresti, another Italian exile. Foresti was a lawyer and politician who had been an active propagandist for the *Carbonari*, the secret group of rebels against Austrian control. Foresti proved to be just as prominent and dynamic as Da Ponte. He was well known in America, highly respected and welcomed with honors for his resistance to tyranny and his dedication to the pursuit of freedom and self-determination, all themes dear to American citizens. Another Italian exile who taught at Columbia was Carlo Leonardo Speranza,

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<sup>1</sup> Mark I. Choate, *Emigrant Nation: The Making of Italy Abroad*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge, 2008.

who was at NYU from 1888 to 1890 before returning to Columbia, where he became Professor of Italian in 1905. He remained at Columbia until his death, having witnessed great changes: the college had become a university in 1896 and moved to its new campus the following year. Speranza died in 1911, and that same year, as Faedda writes, a group of students of Italian descent established Columbia's *Circolo Italiano*, a cultural club that would one day give birth to the notion of the *Casa Italiana*. In October 1911, the student newspaper, the *Columbia Daily Spectator*, reported the meeting of the Circle's founding members, and a few months later *Circolo Italiano* formally adopted its statutes. For many, the *Circolo* was the most important Italian club on the East Coast, if not in the entire United States, as John Horace Mariano noted in his 1921 book, *The Italian Contribution to American Democracy*. At the beginning of 1926, the *Daily Spectator* officially disclosed the news of Columbia's latest construction project: an "Italian House" to be built on Amsterdam Avenue north of 116<sup>th</sup> Street, on a plot recently purchased by the university. The preexisting building, Hotel La Porte, was razed in 1926 to build the *Casa*, which after various vicissitudes was finally inaugurated in 1927 on Columbus Day (October 12), the day for honoring Italian culture in America with enthusiasm and national pride. Afterwards Giuseppe Prezzolini, an Italian writer and critic, was teaching at Columbia when he was appointed Director of the *Casa* to succeed Henry J. Burchell in 1930. Prezzolini kept this role until his resignation in 1940 and then remained on the administrative board. He was one of the most active voices in the European and Italian cultural milieu in the early twentieth century. In 1908, he had founded *La Voce*, a journal dedicated to literature and criticism; in 1915-1916 he wrote for Mussolini's *Popolo d'Italia*, and after World War I he represented Italy at the League of Nations. When Fascism revealed its totalitarian essence, he became firmly and publicly opposed to it; in 1925 he drafted the "Manifesto of the Anti-Fascist Intellectuals". Prezzolini was invited to teach at Columbia because he was a noted public intellectual and was recommended by Professor Arthur Livingston, a Columbia professor and expert on European literature and culture.

## BOOK REVIEWS

Prezzolini was the first man to make the works of Benedetto Croce known abroad when that writer was too little known even in Italy. Prezzolini played a key, strategic role for *Casa Italiana*, with ambitious plans to build a network of high-level institutional relations. He wanted to transform the *Casa* into a lively and powerful institution, although as director he received no salary, and the financial situation of the *Casa*, in general, was dire. The *Casa* reached agreements with Italy and Italian Americans on academic initiatives and student exchanges.

The *Casa Italiana* became firmly established against the background of relations with Mussolini as head of the Italian government, then the Fascist colonial policy, the outbreak of World War II and the postwar period. The main protagonists were naturally Italians, but they were not the only ones. Lorenzo Da Ponte and then Giuseppe Prezzolini formed a crucial strategic linkage for this institution, which for ninety years now has represented a “bridge” between Italy and America.

Barbara Faedda’s book adds a chapter to the history of Italian emigration, portraying the irrepressible role of culture, and mainly of Italian culture, not only as a “bridge” between two countries but also as a cornerstone of social development, which goes hand in hand with political and economic development.

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