



A Brief History of Italian Heritage and Culture Month in New York

I. I. (September 24, 2014)



More than three and one half decades of special events, concerts, exhibits, lectures, and proclamations to celebrate and to better inform New York, the largest Italian city outside Italy, and other geographic areas throughout the United States and the world, of the important legacy of Italian and Italian American culture.

New York's Italian Heritage and Culture Month will be celebrating its thirty-eighth anniversary this year, 2014. The Italian Heritage and Culture Committee of New York, Inc. (IHCC-NY, Inc.) has provided more than three and one half decades of special events, concerts, exhibits, lectures, and proclamations to celebrate and to better inform New York, the largest Italian city outside Italy, and other geographic areas throughout the United States and the world, of the important legacy of Italian and Italian American culture.

It is important to recognize from a historical perspective that in the spring of 1976, NYC Mayor Abraham Beame, proclaimed the first "Italian Culture Week," from May 17 to 23. The idea for such progress was proposed to Dr. Leo Bernardo, Director of the Bureau of Foreign Languages, who was easily persuaded of the value and importance of this project. Dr. Bernardo appointed Dr. Angelo Gimondo as citywide coordinator, resulting in the first celebration of Italian Culture Week under the auspices of the Bureau of Foreign Languages of the Board of Education of the City of New York. Nine



years later, in 1985, the festivities moved to October, to coincide with various Columbus Day celebrations. By then, a week had become too short to encompass the range of programs so the week was transformed to "Italian Heritage and Culture Month." As the years passed, the Governor of the State of New York and the President of the United States joined in acknowledging this significant annual celebration in issuing proclamations in recognition of the heritage and culture of Italians and Italian Americans.

This pioneering month-long celebration was conceptualized by Dr. Gimondo, then President of the Italian Bilingual Educators Association and Superintendent of School District 30 in the Borough of Queens, NYC. Dr. Gimondo, honored by the Italian Government on several occasions including that of Gran Uff. in the Order of the Star of Solidarity, was the head of the corps of volunteers who annually coordinated the celebration of Italian heritage and culture in the five boroughs of New York. He was joined by like-minded enthusiasm in Rosamaria Riccio Pietanza, then President of the Italian Teachers Association of New York. Together they gathered numbers of educators and administrators with an interest in language and culture, many of whom continue to be presently involved with the IHCC-NY, Inc.

Soon, after inception, the idea to dedicate each year's event to a specific theme or personality representative of the history and culture of Italy and Italian Americans was conceived. Dr. Gimondo retired as founder and president of the IHCC-NY, Inc. in December 2006, after 30 years of outstanding leadership and leaving an important legacy that continues today. He presently serves on the Board as a prime collaborator and advisor.

Commencing in January 2007, Cav. Uff. Joseph Sciame, Vice-President for Community Relations at St. John's University, past president of the national Order Sons of Italy in America, and an IHCC-NY, Inc. Board member for three decades, was elected President/Chair of the Board of Directors. Under his leadership, the Board of Directors of the IHCC-NY, Inc. continues to be comprised of eminent representatives of New York's Italian and Italian American community. Each year the Board of Directors selects a new theme and then proceeds to create a theme poster and publish a Calendar of Events.

The role of the Board of Directors continues to promote, coordinate, and manage the month long celebration. The themes are herein included for review and historical importance, and represent many individuals, concepts and events that have memorialized the Italian and Italian American movement.

In addition to its efforts to promote heritage and culture, as well as the annual Da Vinci Award ceremonies conferred upon distinguished Italian and Italian American personages, the IHCC-NY, Inc. has in recent years:

- sponsored a concert in Washington Square Park in honor of the 100-year birth of Giuseppe Garibaldi;
- organized a special anniversary gathering on the occasion of the 200th birthday of Antonio Meucci, the true inventor of the telephone;
- mounted an international art exhibit from Palermo, Sicily by Rosa Ponte Fucarino; partnered with the Institute of Classical Architecture and Classical America in the 500th Anniversary Celebration of Andrea Palladio;
- supported the efforts of the Italian and Italian American community in advancing the cause of the Advanced Placement exam in Italian at high schools in the USA;



- saluted the lifetime achievements of the late Rocco Caporale, Ph.D., and former Board Member;
- hosted a special tribute to international playwright Dott. Cav. Mario Fratti for his recognition of the play and movie *Nine*;
- participated in the annual flag raising ceremonies at Bowling Green, the site of the arrival of the first Italian to the New York shores, Pietro Cesare Alberti. Commencing in 2010, the October flag-raising has been held at the “Mother Italy” statue at Hunter College, CUNY, NYC, followed by a traditional luncheon to celebrate Italian Heritage and Culture Month with the IHCC’s Board of Directors;
- credited with advocating and successfully being a leader in the quest to obtain an official U.S. Congressional Resolution for the 150th Anniversary of the Unification of Italy;
- welcomed in 2012 an international exhibit from Florence, Italy, honoring Amerigo Vespucci inaugurating the year’s theme for Italian Heritage and Culture Month, and in October 2012 a bust statue of Amerigo Vespucci by sculptor Greg Wyatt was unveiled for permanent display at the Organization of American States (OAS) under the sponsorship of Ambassador Sebastiano Fulci;
- celebrated Italian Heritage & Culture Month at the National Arts Club, as the IHCC – NY, Inc. sponsored international singer Cristina Fontanelli for a first time event at that private club in October 2012.
- co-sponsored in December 2012 the famed Presepio at the Staten Island campus of St. John’s University with the Casa Belvedere Foundation. The Presepio was a gift to the NY Fire Department by Italian officials of the Chamber of Commerce of Naples following the events of 9.11; and
- hosted special ceremonies held in March 2013 at the John D. Calandra Italian American Institute to inaugurate the “Poster Series” created by Artistic Director John Battista DeSantis in honor of 2013: Year of Italian culture in the United States. Several weeks later Ambassador Claudio Bisogniero visited the site to view the same posters in a unique stop in New York City where he marveled “...at the creativity of the year’s theme and carried out so well...”

The IHCC-NY, Inc.’s role in concert with the Office of the Consulate General, now led by Minister Natalia Quintavalle, as well as with the American Association of Teachers of Italian (AATI) and the Italian American Committee on Education (IACE), has been strengthened over the years in more collaborative ways so as to achieve common goals in education, heritage, culture, language, diplomatic respect and a better understanding of the Italianità that is so very important to the legacy bequeathed to Italian Americans by their families. In fact, for many years the Consuls General of Italy have each fully supported the efforts of IHCC-NY, as well as through the Office of the Director of Istituto Italiano di Cultura di New York.

Today, owing to the work of the IHCC-NY, Inc., a variety and multitude of programs and events are organized by cultural associations, community centers, libraries, schools, and university departments of Italian in the Greater New York metropolitan area to proudly celebrate October’s Italian Heritage and Culture Month. Moreover, other states such as Illinois, Massachusetts, New Jersey, Rhode Island, Washington D.C., Wisconsin, and several others, have worked to follow the lead of the IHCC-NY, Inc. and enhanced their activities in their respective states for the month of October.

For the year 2013, the Board of Directors of the IHCC-NY, Inc., joining with the theme advocated in Italy, determined that it be appropriate in its role to recognize Italian and Italian Americans, by celebrating the 2013: Year of Italian Culture in the US, thereby acknowledging the achievements and great accomplishments of Italy and its gifts of heritage and culture to the world, and more specifically to the United States. In a true Italian spirit of enterprise, energy and enthusiasm, Italians and Italian Americans can be saluted and hailed in special ways. Indeed, the legacy lives on!



During the course of the year 2013-14, the Board of Directors continued its tradition at the Mother Italy Statue with its various recognitions, and for the October 2013 Columbus Day weekend saluted Board Member Joseph DiPietro for his stalwart work as the President of the Federation of Italian American Organizations of Queens, while over the 2014 Mother's Day weekend, the Board recognized the work of Deputy Consul Lucia Pasqualini, who would be returning to Italy to continue her work for the government. The October 2014 salute will honor Distinguished Professor Cav. Anthony Julian Tamburri, Ph.D., Dean, Calandra Institute, for his lifetime professional, ethnic and cultural achievements.

A chronological listing representing the array of themes designated throughout more than three and one half decades to celebrate the Italian Heritage and Culture Month follows at the end of this booklet.

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