

'Iron Lady' Italian Style

Maria Teresa Cometto (March 07, 2016)



“She must be a very determined person”— that’s how she struck me the moment I met her in September 2011, when she had just taken office here. And, well, the way she has steered the biggest Italian institution in the Big Apple for the last four years, Natalia has lived up to that impression.

Her landing wasn’t easy. In the summer of 2011, the only thing people talked about when they talked about Italy was either the financial crisis and the country’s risk of exiting the euro zone, or [Silvio Berlusconi](#) [2]’s sex scandals.

American TV mirrored public sentiment; “Jersey Shore” and its bevy of young Italian-American “tamarri” were all the rage, and “Law & Order: Special Victims Unit” aired an episode in which a (fictional) Italian consul in New York tried to exonerate an important Italian politician accused of



rape.

Though the episode was clearly inspired by the real-life scandal surrounding [Frenchman Dominique Strauss-Kahn](#) [3], it's significant that the show's writers took aim at an Italian instead. "Italian machismo is still alive and well in the collective imagination of Americans, but that's not the reality of our country anymore, and demonstrating that will be a top priority," [Quintavalle](#) [4] told me at the time.

As the first woman to head up an Italian consulate as important as that of New York, she did just that. "Natalia Quintavalle symbolizes the new role Italian women play," said [Matilda Cuomo](#) [5], the most famous Italian-American woman in New York. "Like Italian-American women, they are now capable of taking on any responsibility."

The Pink Consulate

When Quintavalle landed in New York, two of three vice-consuls—Laura Aghilarre and Lucia Pasqualini—were women, and now two additional vice-consuls assist her, Isabella Periotto and Chiara Saulle.

That is a major breakthrough with respect to 25 years ago when Quintavalle was starting out. "Back then," she explains, "the diplomatic world was male, but it was beginning to open up and become more interdisciplinary. It began paying more attention to things outside of politics, like economics. My favorite subject."

Quintavalle immediately set about giving a woman's touch to her office by "freshening up" the buildings on Park Avenue where the Consulate and Italian Cultural Institute (ICI) are housed. And, like any smart homeowner, she launched "Open the Consulate Doors and Let the Air In," a project that "dusted off" both buildings for the Festa della Repubblica in 2012. Her completely new approach got other "pieces" of New York's Italian network involved—from ICI to ICE (the Italian Trade Commission) to Enit (the Italian tourism agency)—and garnered widespread support from Italians and Italian Americans.

Holding Cultural Heritage in High Esteem

Unlike some of her predecessors, Quintavalle understood that the historical and cultural heritage of the million-plus Italian Americans in New York is an asset to be cherished rather than snubbed. That's how she managed to rally their support for many initiatives, the most important of which may have been the campaign to include Italian subtitles at the Metropolitan Opera House.

Since the start of the fall 2012 season, theatergoers can follow all of the Italian operas in the original language. A great opera buff herself, Quintavalle obtained the funds to do so from major Italian-American organizations like the National Italian American Foundation, the Columbus Citizen Foundation, the Order Sons of Italy in America and the National Organization of Italian American Women; leaders in the Italian-American community like Steve Acunto, Frank Bisignano, Jason DeSena-Trennert, Frank Guarini, Joseph Perella; Dolce & Gabbana; and successful "Italian New Yorkers" like [Alberto Criatore](#) [6], Massimo Ferragamo and the late [Baroness Mariuccia Zerilli-Marimò](#) [7].

Under Quintavalle's guidance and with the contribution of [IACE](#) [8], the Italian American Committee on Education (full disclosure—I am its vice president), introducing Italian into New York's lyric temple helped lead to the reinstatement of an AP Italian exam in American high schools.

Alert to Economics and Italian Start-ups

Her antennae always poised to intercept new trends, Quintavalle has also been an enthusiastic supporter of young Italians who come to New York to develop startups, the new generation of high-tech avant-gardists looking to make it big in the Big Apple.

I confess I'm proud of having inspired Quintavalle's interest in this phenomenon. On more than one



occasion she has referred to the book *Tech and the City*, which I co-wrote with [Alessandro Piol](#) [9] and published in 2013, as her “bible” for navigating the new world of New York startups. She asked me to organize the first meeting at the Consulate with new Italian entrepreneurs who had created startups in New York. Speaker of Italy’s Chamber of Deputies Laura Bordini also participated in the event, where she got to listen to their stories and hear how Italian authorities can help them. Last November Quintavalle lent her crucial support to putting on the exhibit, “[Make in Italy](#) [10] – 50 Years of Italian Breakthroughs from the First PC to the First Space-Bound Espresso Machine,” about Italy’s best-kept secret: its contribution to technological progress.

A Special Addio

Quintavalle leaves in April, after welcoming [President Sergio Mattarella](#) [11] to New York. She leaves behind a legacy that includes a wonderful mentorship program, organized with the help of Periotto and Saulle. “[Meet the New Italians of New York](#) [12]” is a series of monthly meetings where successful Italians—from doctors to musicians to athletes—advise young people trying to get their start (see the article in the Events section of this issue of i-ItalyNY).

For me, it will be particularly hard to bid Natalia goodbye. She and I have a lot in common: we’re the same age (top secret!); our daughters are almost the same age; and we love long walks in the mountains and dogs (hers is Zazie, mine Sweetie). But most importantly, neither of us takes no for an answer. We’ll miss her iron will, ‘softened’ only by her elegant made-in-Italy look.

* [Maria Teresa Cometto](#) [13] is a journalist and writer who has lived in New York since 2000. She is a US contributor to the Italian daily “*Corriere della Sera*,” the weekly magazine “*Grazia*,” and the blog *StartupItalia!* She is the co-author of *Tech and the City* with Alessandro Piol, and curator of the exhibition “*Make in Italy*” with Riccardo Luna.

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Links

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- [3] https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/New_York_v._Strauss-Kahn
- [4] http://www.consnewyork.esteri.it/consolato_newyork/en/il_consolato/il_console/il-console.html
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