

Dedication of *Mother Italy*

Monday, June 26, 2000

Dedication - 11:00 am

Jack I. Poses Park

HUNTER

Office of the President

The Hunter College community is proud
to dedicate *Mother Italy*, a bronze figural statue
by sculptor Joseph Massari. It is a gift to the college from
Denise, Donato, Filomena and Giuseppe d'Agosto and
will be displayed in the Jack I. Poses Park.

Welcome

David A. Caputo,
President, Hunter College

Comments

Honorable Dominic R. Massaro
Chair, Dedication Committee

Comments

D'Agosto Family

Closing

President David A. Caputo

"Mother Italy"
by
Nicholas Falco

It was usually observed quite unexpectedly; and before one had but the briefest moment to study it, it was gone from view. Innumerable were the motorists who, traveling north out of New York City, along Bruckner Boulevard in The Bronx, caught a glimpse of "Mother Italy," a magnificent bronze sculpture then on the grounds of the Capitol Memorial Company located alongside the boulevard in the borough's Pelham Bay section. Many made a mental note that at the next opportunity they might drive by more slowly for a leisurely look at what had caught their attention. Others, realizing that they might not pass that way again, detoured and returned to the intersection to examine the sculpture.

A vast imposing work measuring 9' wide and 7 1/2' high, and resting on a pedestal of about equal size, "Mother Italy" was fashioned by the famous Italian sculptor Giuseppe Massari, who was born at the turn of the century. An inscription on the monument very ably sums the reason for its creation. It reads:

This Monument Commemorating The Italian Contribution To The New Continent Was Conceived And Donated By The Sculptor Giuseppe Massari In Recognition Of The Assistance Which The United States Gave His Native Country For The Reconstruction Needed After The Ravages Of The Second World War.

Massari was born in the town of Ortona a Mare nestled among the mountains of Abruzzi and facing the sea. As a young man with a strong curiosity for the world outside his immediate surroundings, he decided to emigrate to Argentina. There he apprenticed to a plasterer who had emigrated from the Lombardy region of his homeland. Though it is not clear, perhaps it was at this time that young Massari decided to make sculpturing his career. Returning to Italy, he began to study this art in earnest. The late Dr. Nicola Brunori, well-known among many of the older generation of Bronx Italian Americans, and something of a legend in his own time for his elegant and distinguished appearance, was a keen student of art and wrote a brief study of Massari. This work was published privately in 1965, a few short years before the respected doctor's death.

Massari, the good doctor informs us, continued his studies not only in Italy but in Paris and New York. His stay in the United States is of special interest for it was during this period that he was inspired to the creation of his most significant work.

The artist spend two distinct periods of his early life in this country, the first being from 1928 to 1930, the other 1934 to 1940 (he was to return for a brief visit in 1953). While here, he came to know and to love the American people. He procured employment in the studio of the noted sculptor Paul Maship, where he made animal and other decorative designs for use in the zoos of the City of New York. He also sculptured some ornaments which were to be placed on the Woodrow Wilson Memorial in Geneva. Later in life, some of his animal sculptures would gain fame for the quality of their tenderness and the beauty and sympathy with which he portrayed them.

When Massari returned to Italy in 1940, Europe was in the midst of the cruel World War II. As Dr. Brunori so eloquently

wrote, the artist "who loved life, all of life -- of men, of animals, of earth, of sea, of sky, was forced to witness its deformation, if not its complete destruction." The War destroyed his home as it did the homes of countless tens of thousands. Some of his sculptures were demolished by bombs, others were carried away as booty by the retreating Germans. But the destruction did not discourage the man, for like most artists he possessed something of a spiritual quality which aided him to fight against despair. Indeed, it was at this period of his life that he began to philosophize over the fact that the American Army, which had helped so greatly in liberating Italy and which was beginning to assist it in recovering from the effects of the War, was, in a sense, repaying Italy for the benefits the United States had received from Italians who had settled here from the time of the Discovery by Christopher Columbus.

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States with a dual purpose. It was to be one which would remind this country of the contributions made to it by those immigrants who came from Italy; but, at the same time, be an expression of deep and sincere thanks on the part of Italy for the help the United States was extending to make for its regeneration and rebirth.

Once the idea caught hold, Massari worked on it with total dedication and commitment, until by 1953 his work was completed -- not the large proportioned group we see today, but one in a much reduced scale, an artist's model. Basically, "Mother Italy" might be said to be a work of art in allegorical form. Italia herself is the central figure "always young and vibrant." She embraces two female figures who represent principally the musical and theatrical arts, fields in which Italians have distinguished themselves and for which Italy is celebrated. To the right is a monk who represents the religious qualities of the Italians, and religion's concern for humanity symbolized by a woman and child. To the left

is found a man carrying a pick, the tool of the humble laborer. His features symbolize the indomitable spirit of the Italian workingman which permitted him to play his role in the building of the United States. The child at his side stands for the American-born children of the Italian immigrant, who through education have made innumerable contributions to their native country. At either end of the group is a bust, one of Columbus, the Discoverer who personifies the age of the Italian explorer, and the other bust is that of Roma, representing the universalality of spirit in the arts and the law to which Italy has contributed so greatly.

If one examines the base of the group very closely, some interesting details can be seen there. Engraved into it are a radio antenna symbolizing the achievements of the inventor, Guilermo Marconi, and subway cars representing the subway systems of the United States built largely "with the sweat and the blood of the first Italian immigrants...." Also to be seen are symbols of Italy's contribution to such diverse fields as horticulture and

sports. The sports symbols are found on the reverse side of the sculpture and depict boxing, cycling, boating and aviation.

In December, 1953, Massari brought his model to New York with the high hope that it might find its way to the White House -- with the understanding that if it was accepted he would resculpture the group in near life-size proportions to be placed on a foundation.

A lengthy period followed without success, and for various reasons an appropriate locale to accommodate the work could not be found. However, the artist went forward with his plans. He resculptured the group in life size, and through the courtesy of the Italian Government shipped in March 1962 to the United States. His thought was that the day could not be far off when a site would be chosen, now perhaps in New York City. Among suggested sites was LaGuardia Airport, at the time undergoing an expansion. The extension of runways there dampened this expectation. The Italian Pavilion at the 1964-65 World's Fair site was likewise suggested, but at the last moment officials reduced the size of the Italian

area, and once again the statue could not be placed. All during this period, it lay in a storage house in Maspeth, Queens, through the courtesy of the famous Santini Brothers Moving Company. Other suggestions were made, such as local parks or squares in Italian neighborhoods. The parks idea was vetoed, however, for at the time in New York City vandalism saw many a work of art desecrated. As far as erecting the statue in an Italian community, it was pointed out that many such communities were shrinking. The idea of placing "Mother Italy" at the entrance to a museum that was going to be erected as part of the National Headquarters of the Order Sons of Italy in America, in Washington, D.C. -- as advanced by Dominic Massaro, then the Order's national public relations director -- began to take hold but did not materialize when the Order, in 1971, sold the site to the Government of Yugoslavia for its Embassy. But Dr. Brunori would not forget Massaro's efforts at placement and the years during which they collaborated toward an appropriate setting.

Several entities were to be responsible for bringing matters to a temporary conclusion, among them the "LaGuardia House" in Manhattan and the "E.S.C.A. Club" in The Bronx. Dr. Brunori wrote that "[i]t would be fitting to place the statuary group of Massari on the intersection of busy traffic lanes.... Modern life expresses activities of travel and the importance of streets, ways and means of communication.... People spend a great deal of time on streets and highways." The Di Tullio Family, famous monument makers for cemeteries and owners of the Capitol Memorial Co., provided a solution -- their lot on Bruckner Boulevard. They would also donate the labor and materials to make for its erection. Thus, "Mother Italy" found a temporary resting spot in The Bronx.

As Dr. Brunori was nearing the end of his life, he decided to entrust the monument to Dominic Massaro, noting his youthful enthusiasm in the Italian community and the prophetic similarity of his name to that of the sculptor. And so he did, also giving him the artist's model as a personal token. Massaro had already

proven, as far back as the mid-1960's, relentless in attempting to place the work. And, then, one day, it disappeared. The death of Di Tullio, the immediate sale of his Capitol Memorial Company by the family in 1975 witnessed all the stonework in his yard, including "Mother Italy," removed. Nor could Massaro learn of the whereabouts of the monument. "Selective memory," he would quip, "mystified the purchasers." Years passed, more than decade.

Sometime in 1990, Massaro, now a justice of New York's Supreme Court, was enjoying dinner on behalf of the Verazzano Institute at Mercy College in Dobbs Ferry with representatives of the Italian Historical Society of America. He remembers it well, at Lago di Como restaurant, in Tarrytown. Seated across from Comm. Donato D'Agosto, the Society's vice president, by chance D'Agosto mentioned that he had a monument of unknown origin that, perhaps, the judge might assist him in locating. As he described it, Massaro could not contain his joy: "Mother Italy," he proclaimed!!!

It had been more than thirty years since Massari's finished work first arrived in New York. Its rediscovery once again set in motion the arduous task of locating an appropriate setting to fulfill the object for which it has been created. But while D'Agosto was likewise anxious to see the monument suitably erected, indeed he had rescued it from a wrecking yard in Connecticut for this very reason some years before, his idea ran more to a bucolic setting, a school campus, a church yard, even an island in New York Harbor. Massaro never pressed any claim to the work of art, choosing rather to exercise what he termed "a continuing moral obligation" to the sculptor and Dr. Brunori's trust alike, in contrast with the reality of D'Agosto's preservationist efforts, on which, to his high credit, no expense was spared.

One day, almost in jest, D'Agosto suggested how wonderful it would be if a site could be found accessible to the Italian Consulate and Cultural Center on Park Avenue between 68th and 69th

Streets. The thought was immediately encouraged by then Consul General Franco Mistretta, who conceived the monument as a focal point for visiting Italian dignitaries. Fortuitously, the incoming president of Hunter College, located across the street from the Italian complex, was an Italian American: the educator Dr. David A. Caputo. He was quickly enlisted. "I contacted him even before he arrived from Indiana to assume his new duties," Massaro recalls. That was in 1995. During his tenure, Dr. Caputo caused the college to become a willing recipient of the monument. He offered several possible sites. The most feasible, as it turned out, is the small private park owned by the College at 68th Street between Lexington and Third Avenues -- not quite two blocks from the Italian presence on Park. And so the odyssey of "Mother Italy" now comes to its end. Poses Park, located between two of the city's busiest streets, and in the heart of one of its leading institutions of higher education, will, as Dr. Brunori desired so many years ago, become "the intersection of busy traffic lanes" setting for the

monument. It will be dedicated, on June 26, 2000; in Massaro's words "to the Italian immigrant... symbolic of mothers of every nationality who sent their children to build a nation of immigrants, conceived in liberty and dedicated to the equality of all those who came, and of those yet to come."

The generosity of the D'Agosto Family will now allow this long hidden treasure to be appreciated by thousands of people -- daily!

(A long-time appreciator of things Italian, Nicholas Falco updated this article from when it first appeared in the August, 1970 issue of the Italo American Times.)