

## THE STORY OF A TRANSPLANTED INDUSTRY: LACE WORKERS OF THE ITALIAN QUARTER OF NEW YORK: BY ELISABETH A. IRWIN



TALL, ugly office building at the lower end of MacDougal Street marks the entrance to what was once Aaron Burr's suburban estate. Here one hundred years ago the beautiful Theodosia used to gallop out on her pony to meet her father coming up from the city. From here a winding road led to the charming old house near the river bank where Aaron entertained his friends. This was known as Richmond Hill. Now the house is gone, the trees are felled, and streets run ruthlessly through Theodosia's garden. The charm is not gone, however. The whole district reeks with associations and the rows of old houses on Charlton, Varick and MacDougal Streets at least have the air of being the immediate successors of the Burrs' wild roses and hollyhocks. In contrast to these dignified old mansions we find the tenants a picturesque community of Southern Italians. MacDougal Street from Washington Square to Spring Street is teeming with swarthy babies and their gaily attired mothers. In the fall of the year, children bearing trays of gay flowers for our spring hats ply back and forth from home to shop. Red peppers hanging in strings from the windows and the little stands green with salads add the bright colors that belong to the native land of this transplanted race.

It is very fittingly in this quarter, with more Italians to the acre than Italy itself has ever boasted, that a true Italian industry has been started. The big, light rooms on the second floor of one of these old mansions have been turned over to the making of Italian embroidery and lace. The Rosies, the Angelinas, the Lucias and Marias need no longer wear out their deft artistic fingers by wrapping candy, or binding pasteboard boxes. Here the Italian instinct for creating the beautiful finds full play, and full pay.

The embroidery and lace which is being made is from the patterns of the fifteenth and sixteenth century. This art was almost forgotten in Italy itself until about fifty years ago, when it was revived by some of the wealthy Italian ladies, under whose eyes the peasants were often idle and in want because of no remunerative occupation when crops failed or famine came. Simultaneously in several different sections of Italy, this industry was recreated. A few old women were found who had learned some of the original stitches from their grandmothers and were able to copy pieces of work that

had come down in the families of the nobility. These old women were made teachers and soon it became evident that the genius for making beautiful laces had not died with the work itself. With this revival of interest, old samples of lace and embroidery have been collected from monasteries, convents, churches and castles, many pieces several hundred years old. In this way nearly all the antique designs which are rare and beautiful have been revived and copied stitch by stitch.

The number of schools increased rapidly, and the quality of the work improved until now it is possible to buy in Italy laces as fine and embroideries as beautiful as those old bits that have been so long admired as examples of a lost art.

**T**WO years ago several American women who are interested in the Italians in New York were spending the winter in Italy, and admiring the laces, lamented that such talent should be lost upon box factories and sweatshops when the Italian girls migrate to America. From this discussion, under the spell of the blue Italian sky, originated the plan of starting the industry here. They talked much about it, and while they were still in Italy they enlisted the co-operation of the patronesses and teachers of the work there, and one of the finest teachers at Rome promised to come and start the work in New York, if they would find the girls.

By November, nineteen hundred and five, the American Committee had secured one room and



*Flouise Seave Shinn*

"CHATTERING IN ITALIAN AS FAST  
AS THEIR FINGERS CAN FLY."

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six girls willing to begin the work at two dollars a week. The "Scuola d'Industrie Italiane," as the school is called, opened in this small way under the direction of Miss Carolina Amari, who came from Italy according to her promise, with patterns and materials to launch the enterprise here. Miss Amari brought with her many of the old patterns to be copied and pieces of work begun in the school there, to be finished.

It was a problem at first how the beginners' work should be made to pay for itself. This was solved, however, by Miss Amari, who brought partially finished pieces where the more complicated work was done and the easy, but time-consuming stitches were left for the girls here. This plan worked very successfully. By the time of the first exhibition of work in December, several handsome pieces were actually finished to be shown in addition to the Italian samples of what might later be expected.

The adaptability of the girls in Italy to this work encouraged the American women to bring over not only the patterns for the laces but the form of organization as nearly as possible. No time card marks the arrival of the girls, and no forewoman shouts commands and reproofs into their ears. A glimpse into their rooms, now two instead of one, on a winter morning would show half a dozen groups of girls gathered about the cheery grate fire or near the big windows chattering in Italian as fast as their fingers can fly—that is the chattering limit—when their tongues outstrip their needles; then, and only then, is restraint placed upon them. Here twenty girls, each working out a different pattern on a different fabric, present quite another aspect from that of the box factory on the next block, where a glimpse into a badly-lighted, ill-smelling loft reveals forty or fifty young Italians, who might be the sisters of the merry lace-makers, pasting and folding boxes amid the clatter of machinery and the harsh commands of the foreman, whose sole duty it is to walk up and down the long lines and spur them on to faster work.

The factory laws, however, are carefully observed by the managers of the "Scuola" in spirit as well as in letter. No child laborers, no overtime, no evening work, are found here. Working papers are stringently insisted upon, and half past five sees the girls trooping out after the day's work. More than that, a bright, homelike atmosphere, not stipulated by the Labor Commission, pervades the whole place. The house where it is situated is a Settlement and often as someone opens the door, to pass in or out, a song from the kindergarten below floats in and is taken up by the girls as they sew.

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**V**ISITORS come now and then to admire the work, and find a welcome here that does not greet them at the neighboring box factory. The girls are always proud to show their work, and exhibit an interest and enthusiasm for it that could scarcely be elicited by the partial production of two thousand boxes a day. Miss Amari was quite amazed at the aptitude these girls have shown for the work from the be-

ginning. She had anticipated some loss of skill and interest in the new environment, but found on the contrary an increased interest and a quickening of wit. When Miss Amari returned, the first spring of the school, she had already trained an Italian teacher to take her place, in laying out and overseeing the work of the girls.

Miss D'Annunzio, the teacher, is not a hard taskmistress, but understands perfectly the temperament of her young countrywomen and elicits from them their best efforts. Last summer one of the women of the Committee, who is connected with a Settlement in the city, offered the hospitality of the Settlement's summer home to the girls of the school for their two weeks' vacation; it was arranged for all to have the same two weeks, the school closed, and off they went together for a good time. They were already friends, so that they enjoyed being together, and returned with many friendships cemented the closer.

In the beginning it was necessary to pay the girls a small amount even while learning in order to induce them to leave seemingly more

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remunerative trades to learn this new craft. One girl, loath to relinquish her three dollars a week, to which she had recently been "raised" from two-fifty, and reluctant to start again on two dollars, at the end of a month passed her fondest hopes and was earning three-fifty; now she is making seven. Had she remained at her former task of wrapping chocolates, five dollars a week would have been all she could have hoped for in a lifetime. Other girls are earning eight nine and ten dollars, and one eleven. This fact is sufficient to keep the school full and to have a waiting list, so that no pay is given now until the beginners have learned enough to be really earners. They usually begin earning after the second week. Then, too, the inducement of piece-work, always a luring prospect, is a great spur to ambition. Since this prize falls to the fine rather than the fast workers, it keeps up the standard of work.

Miss Amari has been back and forth twice between her two schools, the one in Rome and the one here, carrying inspiration from one to the other in the form of samples and finished products. Queen Margherita, interested in the embroidery schools from the beginning in Italy, has taken an especial interest in the starting of the New York school.

**L**AST autumn Miss Amari took work done here for exhibition at Milan, and left here several genuine antiques to be copied. One particularly beautiful lace pattern is copied from an insertion that was found on the skirt of a pope. Another takes its name from the Queen. Several exhibits have been held here where the work has found admirers, and from these have come enough orders to keep the girls at work from one season to the next. At first the work was mostly strips of embroidery for trimmings, then adaptable pieces, such as table covers, doilies and pillows; but now since the demand has been created, shirt-waists and collars, belts, bags and dresses are being rapidly designed and produced. Most of the old work is done on very heavy unbleached linen, with thread of the same color. The result is very effective. A lighter grade, white or gray just off the white, is used for many pieces, and a few of the smaller, finer patterns are being put on fine handkerchief linen for babies' caps and dresses.

It was uncertain at first just how much of a market could be found for the work in this country. It was tolerably certain, however, that one could be worked up, for New York women, many of them, go to Italy for the purpose of procuring just such laces as are now being

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made here. The present appreciation of hand-work, joined with the previous reputation of Italian work, have made the products of the school salable from the beginning. Now a salesroom has been started, where the work is always on exhibition. Exhibits of the work have also been sent to other cities in this country. The results of these have demonstrated that America is capable of appreciating the same work here that it usually travels abroad to find.

Miss Florence Colgate, chairman of the executive committee, has long been interested in Italian cut-work, embroidery and lace, and was one of the originators of the scheme. She has done a great deal of the executive work from the beginning, not only in her practical work in connection with the school, but in planning and managing the exhibits and getting the work before the public. Other members of the committee are Miss Carolina Amari, of Rome; Count and Countess Raybandi Massiglia, Consul-General of Italy and his wife; Miss Elizabeth S. Williams of the College Settlement, New York City; Mr. Gino Speranza, Mrs. Seth Low, Franklin H. Giddings, Esq., and other New Yorkers who are interested in the Italians in America and in artistic hand-work. The Italian Immigration Department at Rome, the Italian Chamber of Commerce, and The Society for the Protection of the Italian Immigrants, as well as the Queen herself, are all heartily in sympathy with the movement to bring to the Italian women here one of their native industries.

