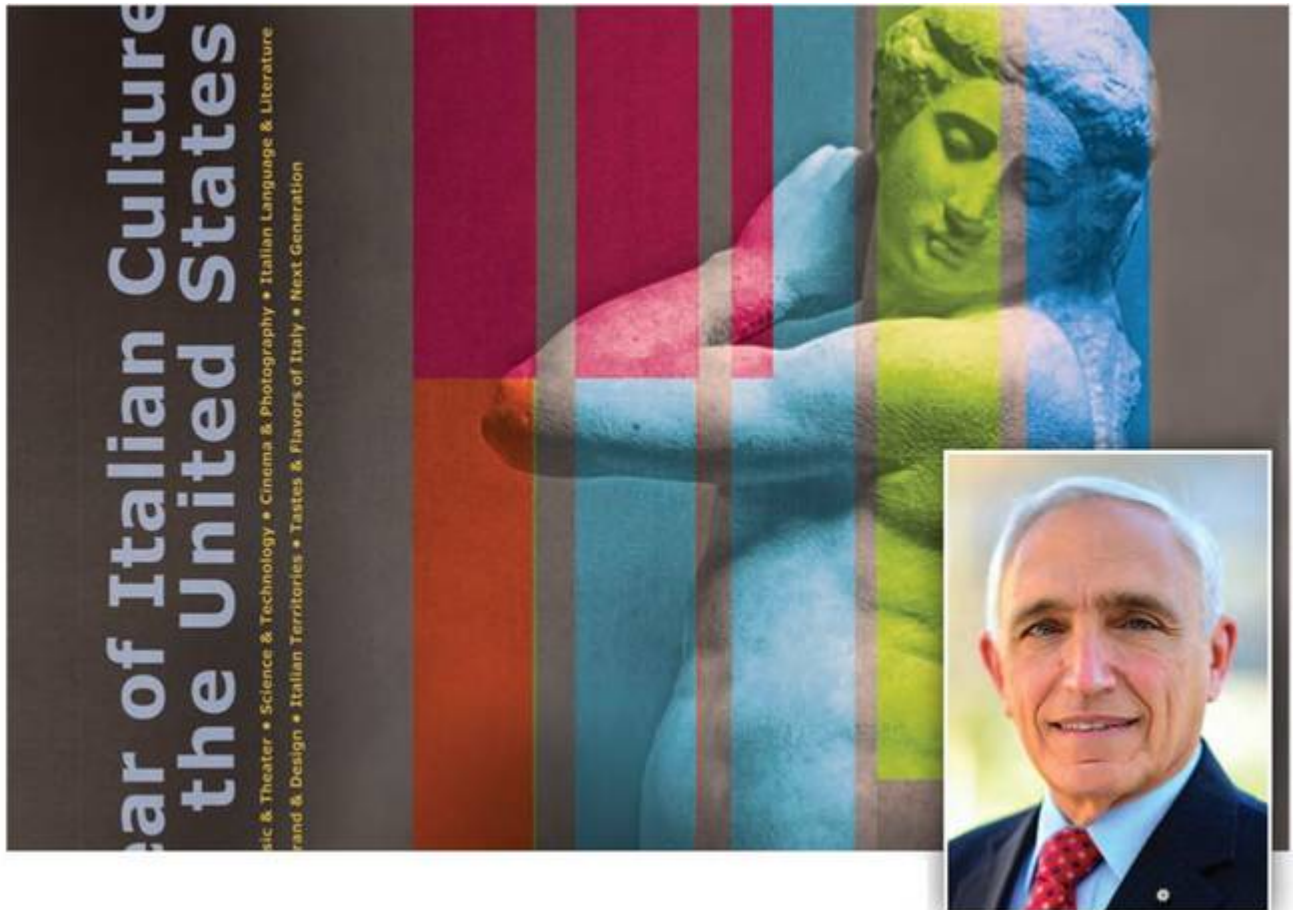


## The 'Italian Month' in New York

O. C. (October 06, 2013)



The significance and goals of the Italian Heritage and Culture Committee of New York. Interview with Joseph Sciamè, President/Chair of the Italian Heritage and Culture Committee-NY

### **Tell us something about the “Italian Heritage and Culture Committee-NY, Inc. How did it come into existence, and why?**

We are a non-profit organization founded in 1976 by Dr. Angelo Gimondo and a group of interested parties to promote a week of recognition about Italian American achievements and activities. If you recall those years in America, it was a period of “enlightenment” in which various racial and ethnic groups began to realize that we were not necessarily a melting pot but rather, as Governor Mario



Cuomo would say: " A mosaic with its many colors."

In that year, then NYC Mayor Abraham Beame, proclaimed the first "Italian Culture Week," which took place in May. The concept of a heritage week, and now month, was to inform students and teachers of the activities of Italians and Italian Americans, and for that reason it took place when students were in school, and Spring appeared to be a good fit. It was later decided that this was not the best of months; and since Columbus Day weekend activities fell in October, the move to October then took place.

### **Is there anything like this in other American states?**

Yes, there are states that have declared it at the municipal and state levels of government in that they have Italian Heritage and Culture Month salutes in places such as Illinois, Connecticut, Massachusetts, Rhode Island, to name a few. Each state does what appears to be "their" celebration; while at the national level, we have been able to obtain declarations from various presidents of the United States that October is Italian Heritage and Culture Month. Oftentimes, we have felt that this recognition has taken great time and energy to get to the right folks at such levels, but in recent years we have seen the letters come forth from the White House declaring such.

### **Nine years after being established, in 1985, the festivities moved to October, to coincide with various Columbus Day celebrations. Mario Cuomo was then the Governor of the State of New York. Did the ethnicity of the first Italian-American Governor have an impact on your activities? And what about today, under the governorship of Mario's son Andrew?**

In retrospect, the Governor and his staff enacted a greater role in the celebration that evolved about the holiday weekend of Columbus. For example, while the Order Sons of Italy in America (OSIA) had always had, by virtue of its constitution, celebrations on the Columbus Day weekends, and I recall this as the State President of the NYOSIA, at that time and during his initial years as Governor, Cuomo commenced hosting celebrations either right in the Empire State Building for a "mock" lighting ceremony, that eventually has become a standard each of the Columbus Day weekends. Governor George Pataki was another great proponent of promoting the month of October for Italian Americans, and he created his Italian heritage to his own mother who regularly attended many a function.

As for our now Governor Andrew Cuomo, I and many have known of him since his father's term of office, and we know of his own personal pride in being the son of two very important Italian Americans, Mario and Matilda Raffa Cuomo. As Governor Andrew Cuomo has taken office at a time when the seeds have matured for the IHCC-NY, Inc. and its annual celebration of Italian Heritage and Culture months, he has continued the tradition of providing resolutions in honor of the month of October and is a visible witness as to what the "American Dream" can be for the children and grandchildren of immigrants such as his grandparents. And so, at the governor's level, we have enjoyed the support of the highest personages in the State of New York towards our efforts.

### **How do you chose your annual theme? Do you collaborate with Italian government institutions?**

The themes are generally developed over a period of six to nine months prior to the year commencing and, yes, we do check and review what the Italian Government, through the Embassy of Italy, might suggest. But, overall, we look to celebrate themes that are pertinent for that year and/or that period of time: i.e., the 500th Anniversary of the passing of Amerigo Vespucci; the 150th Anniversary of the unification of Italy; the 500th Anniversary of the Birth of Palladio; the 400th Anniversary of Galileo; or the 200th Anniversary of the Birth of Garibaldi, etc.

### **What is this year's theme and what are the most relevant events you will sponsor?**



For this year 2013, the celebration will be about “2013: Year of Italian Culture in the United States,” certainly a very wide theme, but we are having events all over the city, state, and nation, and the Embassy of Italy through its Foreign Ministry has led the way. These themes cover any variety of industry and activity in Italy and here in the United States. Here in NYC, there will be some 250 events: from parades in the boroughs, to the opera salutes for the 200th Anniversary of Giuseppe Verdi, to the early childhood programs and right to the dinner on Columbus Day weekend at the famed Waldorf=Astoria; and then the Mass at the Cathedral of St. Patrick and Parade on that Columbus Day Monday. It is a terrific time of the year when all come out with their respective “Italianità.”

**IHCM’s mission includes: “Encourage positive portrayals of Italian-Americans in the media and among the general public.” This is the opposite approach of “anti-defamation” organizations. Your mission is not to “protest against the negative,” but to “encourage the positive...” Any further thoughts in this regard?**

I am, and have been, a major proponent of presenting always the positive image of Italian Americans and have fought that ongoing battle for years, previously as the National/State President of the Order Sons of Italy in America and as the Chairman of its Commission for Social Justice. And, in my opinion, we must not let up on that ongoing battle that oftentimes we encounter with the press, TV portrayals, etc. Nonetheless, it is the “positive” achievements that many do remember and recall throughout the year and, so by presenting sound programs of culture, heritage, and language, we unite and create a synergy of effort by which we are telling new Yorkers, Americans all and even throughout the world, that Italians and Italian Americans are achievers at the highest level. We have so very much to be proud of. This has been my mantra; and my prayer and hope are that the next generation and those that follow truly study and appreciate the sacrifices that the early immigrants made to this great country of ours. We only need to look around the city, in various states and throughout the nation to see the buildings, architecture, sculptures, and so much more in every field of endeavor to know that we are truly Italian and have inherited a great legacy!

To that end, while I serve as President/Chair of the Italian Heritage and Culture Committee-NY, Inc., our Board of Directors and I will do everything possible to promote our heritage and culture with energy, enthusiasm, and education. Most of all, I thank the collaborative efforts of such media and publications as i-Italy that evidences a deep interest in what we are doing. This is the message that we must get to the general public, and that is the only way we can continue to portray the positive image that we are about. We are a good people, and the world knows it, and in the month of October we shine a bit brighter as in the mosaic!

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