

"Italians of a New Italy"

Letizia Airos (June 29, 2016)



During his recent visit to New York City Ambassador Armando Varricchio sat with i-ItalyTV for a long conversation about his new job. We touched upon a number of topics, spanning from culture to technology to the new wave of Italians coming to the US today.

Could I ask you to briefly introduce yourself for those among our readers who may not know who you are? Who is Ambassador Armando Varricchio?

I was born and grew up in Veneto. I studied and then worked at a private business before deciding to begin my diplomatic career. After thirty years I can honestly say that I made the right choice because I am doing a profession that I greatly enjoy!

Up until recently I was working in Rome as Diplomatic Advisor to the Prime Minister and prior to that I worked a lot in Brussels. I have dedicated myself considerably to European issues, so I feel like Europe is my ideal – as well as professional – reference point. But I know the US rather well too.



I moved here as Ambassador only a few months ago, but I worked in this embassy about ten years ago as head of the Economic Bureau. That job led me to travel throughout the United States and get to know certain local dynamics of this incredibly diverse country.

When it came to nominating an ambassador of the United States I was considered the right person. Our profession is rather unique; every two, three, four years you pack your bags and leave.

So you must have many memories linked to Washington and to the United States. Now having returned after a number of years, what have you found to be different?

Many things. We live in a rapid age. Everything changes at a frantic pace. Washington is indeed growing a lot; there are entire urban areas that have changed, that are being developed. There is a terrific new baseball stadium that wasn't there ten years ago, and around the stadium they are building houses, offices, shopping centers, parks... so everything is moving along, and I believe that's typical of this country.

You were recently on your first official visit to New York. Italy has a very, very strong cultural presence in New York. The question that springs to mind is: how can we use that presence to benefit our country?

New York certainly wouldn't be the extraordinary city that we all love without the contribution of Italians.

Mayor De Blasio reminded us of this during our meeting. New York speaks Italian – whenever, wherever. There is no context in which the Italian culture is not present, whether it be music, cinema, literature, philosophy, or fashion. All of these aspects form part of our identity and constitute a great opportunity for Italy.

Our country lacks raw materials, so we have to rely instead on our intelligence and creativity. Italy's fate depends on its ability to be a beacon of contemporary culture. Therefore I believe that for us culture is not secondary but rather essential to our way of being.

How can we ensure that the Italian- American presence will be an asset to the community?

I think it already is an asset! There are many different kinds of relationships with Italy. Maybe you're a citizen of the country. Maybe Italy is a sentimental-cultural reference for you. Or maybe it's simply a personal passion of yours.

The Mayor of New York, for instance, is “orgoglioso” (proud) of his Italian surname and his Italian roots. Yet so many people who don't have a surname that sounds Italian still identify with the idea of Italy, and they are all people that we consider our friends.

Among many of these friends of Italy, these American “Italophiles,” there seems to be a growing interest in the study of the Italian language. How can you help?

You have touched on an issue that is very important to me. I'm speaking about the language. I believe it is a great challenge for me, for the Consul General here in New York, as well as for all our diplomatic network in the US, to promote the Italian language. Speaking a language means identifying more intimately with a culture, with another world. So many people want to speak Italian, and we want to give them the opportunity to learn how. I believe that is an essential tool of our diplomatic endeavor.

Americans who love Italy, who are somehow connected to it, might also represent an essential resource for the country. How do you cultivate that resource?

Well they are certainly witnesses of Italy and Italian-ness. In Washington I happen to be invited to the homes of important figures in the worlds of politics, economics, culture, the media, and I've found many references to Italy in these homes: works of art, books, photographs... In the United



States the love of Italy is such that anyone can interpret it in his or her own way. But all these people love our country.

I might even go so far as to say that they love it more than many Italians who actually live there do. Immersed as they are in their everyday life – they no longer remember – and sometimes even forget – that they live in a country that so many people consider to be the most beautiful country in the world. But those of us who have lived abroad for fairly long periods of time have had the fortune of seeing our country from the outside, like astronauts observing the Earth in orbit. From that vantage point, we have the good fortune to see the big picture, not just the grain of sand.

Beautiful landscape and gorgeous beaches, Renaissance and Baroque art, Dante and Toscanini, neo-realist cinema... Americans know all about those aspects of Italian culture. But sometimes you notice that they know much less about contemporary Italy. What can we do so that Americans get to know more about the country today?

We shoulder the weight of an extraordinary culture and it is our duty to pass that down. The challenge we face on a daily basis is to demonstrate that Italy doesn't simply have an extraordinary past but that it is a modern country in step with the times. That's why it is important not only to promote classic but contemporary culture as well... That's the challenge embassies and cultural institutions take up every day. We do it thanks to the great American cultural institutions, which constantly hold events linked to Italy.

A few weeks ago at the Library of Congress in Washington, I presented a volume that contained memoirs and photographs of many works of art found in American museums. Our challenge is to remind people that Italy is as great now as it always has been. In other words, don't ever take it for granted.

Are there any particular initiatives that you feel as an Ambassador may be worth speaking about? Perhaps regarding young people.

We are working hard to promote young Italian artists. For example, the embassy wants to promote all of the young Italian artists living in the United States, especially in the two big cities, New York and Los Angeles. I believe that these people provide important examples of what Italians are producing today, of the energy to be found in contemporary Italian art.

We wanted to pay our own tribute to an event that took place in Italy on April 30, celebrating the 30th anniversary of the first Internet connection to our country back in 1986. The world has changed in thirty years; the Internet has become a common staple of our daily lives. We decided to invite one of the founders of the Internet, Vint Cerf, to our embassy, to speak in a series of initiatives we call "digital diplomacy." Cerf told us about the beginnings of this extraordinary change that has really defined the age in which we live. He talked about his close collaboration with Italian scientists and researchers. You might say the Internet speaks Italian too.

If I'm not mistaken, for a couple of years now the institutions and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs have been actively using social media...

Certainly. Today social media is our travel companion. We don't do anything without using some form of digital communication. It's an important tool for getting closer to society, to the community, for letting people know what we are and what we do. It has changed the way we work. I'd even say it has changed the essence of our work. It broke down our barriers so that now we work as a team and feel connected to a much wider community.

The Consulate General in New York has been organizing a series of events called "Meet the New Italians" in which young people get the chance to meet Italian professionals from different fields who work in the city. How can you relate to this new emigration - or "mobility" as we call it today - of young people?

I'm totally for it. The Italian presence in the United States is various; it spans the oldest communities



of Genoese in San Francisco to the Italians who arrived at the end of the 19th century in Chicago and New York to those who joined them later, gradually in different waves. But that first group, which carried a one-way ticket, was followed by new Italians, or as I refer to them, Italians of a new Italy – students, researchers, professionals and entrepreneurs who have a round-trip ticket and later acquire another round-trip ticket so they can embark on another journey. There's no such thing as a definitive choice anymore.

These people are no longer leaving Italy behind. They're leaving in search of new experiences, new people, new opportunities. But their bond with Italy remains strong. They create opportunities that they can then bring back to Italy, and then from Italy they take them abroad again. This is a more dynamic presence, one that reflects a world of integration, a world encompassed by a single network. We need to reach out to these Italians while also recognizing that we mustn't forget those who came over here in the past.

What about the presence of young Italians involved with start-ups in America?

I came across those kinds of Italians on the West Coast and recently rediscovered them in Boston. There are also many such Italians here in New York. They are Italians that bring new ideas, who find an opportunity here to develop new ideas and continuously show the United States the quality education the Italian system provides.

They've studied at Italian universities where they've been able to acquire very important skills. Yet these are Italians who, understandably, consider themselves citizens of the world. They feel as at ease in the United States as they would in France, Australia, Israel – anywhere that there are opportunities to develop new initiatives.

There is a lot of talk these days about something called the "Sistema Italia." What does that mean?

Italians have long been considered extraordinary talented individuals who bridle at being part of a team. In my opinion that isn't exactly true. Take sports, for example. We have been soccer champions numerous times, and soccer is a team sport, traditionally speaking. Of course a great striker is essential, but you can't win a game without a fullback or a goalkeeper or a defensive midfielder. We know how to play as a team. Each of us performs a role that we feel best suits our skills, but we can also unite around the same objective.

Is there anything that you would like to say to our readers, something that I might not have asked?

I would like to convey a message of trust, of closeness, and especially tell them all that the public institutions – the embassy and the network of consulates – are open to everyone. Don't hesitate to contact us, to tell us what we could be doing better. We know that we have a big challenge ahead of us and that we must assume a lot of responsibility. But with everyone's help I believe that we can do it better. So I want to thank everyone who is watching and listening to us and impress upon them that we need their help.

To see the interview with Ambassador Varricchio [>>>](#) [2]

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