



Baroness Mariuccia Zerilli-Marimò, Always With Us

Letizia Airos (October 20, 2015)



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Last Saturday an extraordinary person, an inspiring role model for her philanthropic commitment, has left us. An exceptional woman who has devoted her whole life to the promotion of Italian culture, with passion and dedication.

It took me some time before I was able to sit down and write about the sudden passing of someone to whom Italian culture owes so much and whom I had the honor to meet in person and spend time with.

I found out about it while in Washington for the Gala celebrating the NIAF 40th anniversary,

an institution that, like many others, owes so much to Baroness Zerilli-Marimò, an icon for the promotion of the Italian culture in America.

I felt a sudden void, and then the broken voice, on the phone, of Stefano Albertini, the director of 'her' Casa Italiana for the last seventeen years, and maybe her best friend.

It's a loss that's going to be hard to accept, since so vivid was her presence, even though in the last few years she used to spend more time in Montecarlo than in the US. But "The Baroness", as she was known, was never too far from us: she would make her presence felt through her emails, her comments on our work, her encouragement, her meetings while she was in New York and her interest in our projects. She was well aware that the endeavor undertaken was not a simple one, and she wanted to know everything.

I remember her in our last meeting, firm and maternal at the same time, as ready to criticize as she was to compliment you. We were in her hotel room, after she had sold her magnificent home across from Central Park, an extraordinary place that had been visited by so many illustrious names of Italian and American history. Her eyes would scan everything, with curiosity and tenderness.

That day I left feeling even more grateful for the advice received by a person who not only seemed alert and rational, but also young, constructive and full of life. And someone who could listen, a rare virtue today. As a woman I owe her a lot, and I'm not talking about donations or financial support. She has been a true mentor. Her confidence and optimism, regardless of the difficulties an editorial enterprise in New York would face, made me feel close to her and needy of her support. Ours was a relationship of respect, woman to woman, between two very different people who shared the common goal of wanting to promote Italian culture.

Mariuccia Zerilli-Marimò, a woman from another era, yet a very 'contemporary' one, aware of everything new that was happening around her. With dedication, generosity and without sparing



herself she contributed to the diffusion of Italian culture in the United States. Not only through financial support but also personally participating in some of the projects. And this is how, very delicately, she became at one with the deeper cultural fabric of the Italian world in New York and in the US.

We often talked about her past, about that husband that left her side too early and that she tried to keep alive through her immense commitment to cultural promotion. We talked about it privately. She was being her true self, a genuine person, someone who knew too well the rules of high society but that could still remain herself, always. Elegant and sophisticated, but also capable of disarming simplicity.

She was understanding of young people, with rare compassion and intensity, reason why our staff loved working with her, and the same can be said about the collaborators, the interns and the staff of Casa Italiana who will never forget her. Two among many, maybe the closest: Julian Sachs and Elsa de Giovanni.

And what about the Academic world? The first names that come to mind are Ruth Ben Ghiat and Antonio Monda, as they used to often spend time at the Casa. Then the Foundation 'Tiro a segno', an important association wanted by her as a liason with the italian-american world.

For the Baroness promoting Italian culture also meant getting closer to Italian-American culture, preventing the gap between two worlds to widen. Among her lifetime friends and collaborators there are in fact many Americans, Italian-Americans and Italians. This past summer I participated in and filmed the last meeting of the Casa's Board: the baroness always moved confidently among her friends and collaborators, Matilda Cuomo, Katherina la Guardia, Dominic Massaro, Steve Acunto...

The Baroness contributed to numerous important projects, but NYU's Casa Italiana certainly was her crowning glory. Casa Italiana, established in 1990 to commemorate and honor her late husband Guido, pharmaceutical industrialist, diplomat and notable intellectual, over the years has become an extraordinary center representing italian culture. Stefano Albertini, its historical director, has worked with her in an exemplary fashion, adding value to a philanthropic commitment unmatched for depth and competence. A shared sense of purpose which implied that its legacy would go beyond the walls of this marvellous place, its various activities and scholarships, to become a cultural and organizational movement able to perpetuate its mission.

Thanks to all of this she will live on, because culture is made of passion and freedom, which she has passed on. Her patronage was especially precious since she applied it without prejudices, and with the utmost respect of diversity. A role model for many, an example to follow.

Baroness Mariuccia Zerilli-Marimò, you are with us, always.

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