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## From Italy to America: Photographs of Anthony Riccio Didactic Panels

Bellarmino Museum of Art

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## *From Italy to America*

Between 1880 and 1920, over four million Italians immigrated to America; the majority of them arrived in this country between 1900 and 1914. Most entered through New York City's Castle Gardens or, after 1892, Ellis Island, which opened that year. Though many Italian emigrants chose to settle in locations close to these ports, including Manhattan's Lower East Side, not everyone remained in New York. The creation of "Little Italys" – geographical pockets where Italians could embrace their cultural roots and traditions – in a number of cities up and down the Atlantic seaboard, in the Midwest and even on the Pacific coast attests to this fact.

Many Italians were induced to immigrate to the United States by the success stories they had heard from family and friends who had made the transition before them. All too frequently America was painted as a land of opportunities where anyone could strike it rich. Unfortunately, as many Italian immigrants discovered soon after arriving, the streets in this country were not paved in gold. On the contrary, the obstacles separating them from true prosperity were rife, and included language barriers, unemployment, poverty, and substandard housing conditions. With little education and almost no knowledge of the English language, Italian immigrants were forced to accept what some considered undesirable jobs for very little pay. Most men worked as day laborers, receiving significantly lower wages than natural-born citizens hired for these same tasks. Women, who tended to work in factories, also suffered from wage discrimination. At the root of these injustices lay a fear that Italian immigrants would undermine American superiority. This, in turn, bred racism, yet another hurdle with which Italian-Americans had to contend in their new homeland.

Because many Italians spoke in regional dialects, communication was frequently difficult, even within immigrant neighborhoods. Thus, Italian-Americans tended to live in close proximity to their compatriots, frequently in "cold water flats" and almost always in cramped spaces marked by poor living conditions. Despite the discomforts, these arrangements created close-knit communities in which immigrants relied heavily on one another for security and even survival. This was critical since tensions ran high not only between native citizens and immigrants, but also between discrete immigrant groups, including the Irish and Germans, all of whom were competing with one another for jobs and housing.

The restrictive Emergency Quota Act of 1921 together with the Immigration Act of 1924 abruptly stemmed the flow of Italian immigrants streaming into the United States. For Italian immigrants already living in America, the struggle between assimilation and preservation of the Old World's customs and traditions

defined their existence. Although life in industrial America was taxing, Italian immigrants not only survived but also thrived, leaving an indelible imprint on their adopted homeland.

Anthony Riccio first documented the lives of southern Italians in the 1970s. Among those whom he recorded, in word and in image, were those who remained behind after the great migratory wave swept over the peninsula decades earlier. Included in this group were wives left behind by husbands who promised to make their way back, as well as others who felt ill-prepared to tackle such a monumental upheaval. Life in 1970s Italy was very different from existence in America during those same years. In the former, houses tended to be small, often without electricity or running water. And though children cavorted in the *piazze*, or town squares, which rang out with their peals of laughter, families struggled to make ends meet. In spite of this, the majority of Riccio's subjects lived life to the fullest, enjoying themselves and finding comfort and contentment in the simple things. Above all, they rejoiced in the *quotidianità*, or predictable rhythms of daily life.

-John Camuto, Lauren DiBartolomeo, Megan Forbes, and Katie Tom with Drs. Mary Ann Carolan and Jill Deupi

To hear audio clips from the interviews Anthony Riccio conducted with many of the individuals featured in this exhibition go to [www.fairfield.edu/italytoamerica](http://www.fairfield.edu/italytoamerica) on your smart phone. You can also access these files through the museum's website: [www.fairfield.edu/museum](http://www.fairfield.edu/museum).