

Italy at Work: The Italian Lifestyle on Display (Milan, 29 Nov – 1 Dec 22)

Milan, Italy, May 27–Jul 8, 2022

Deadline: Jul 8, 2022

Chiara Faggella

International conference:

Italy at Work: The Italian Lifestyle on Display

Organized by: Politecnico di Milano, Department of Design

This three-day international conference is organized as part of the VO Project – Voices of Objects. Italian Design from Museum to Home, a FARB 2021 project funded by the Department of Design at the Politecnico di Milano.

Research Team: Paola Cordera (project coordinator), Antonio Aiello, Giampiero Bosoni, Chiara Faggella, Pietro C. Marani, Ico Migliore, Maria Cristina Tonelli, Federica Vacca.

Italy at Work: The Italian Lifestyle on Display will address the exhibition Italy at Work: Her Renaissance in Design Today, that traveled to twelve museums across the United States from 1950 to 1953. In the eyes of the exhibition's organizers, Italy at Work embodied the breadth of the rebirth of Italian arts and crafts.

Historians regard this exhibition a momentous event, one that contributed to the promotion of Italian crafts and design in the United States at a crucial moment during the reconstruction of international political alliances during the early Cold War years. It further entrenched the popularity of already known professionals, such as Gio Ponti, Paolo Venini or Salvatore Ferragamo. It gave prominence to lesser-known firms and individuals that succeeded in standing out among countless other makers operating in Italy in the same fields (e.g., ceramics, glass, fabrics, leatherwork, and straw manufacturing) and demonstrated that the diligence of the Italian creative mind could sustain traditional and modern craft and industry and feed the demand for a new wave of practical and beautiful European objects destined for American homes and wardrobes. More broadly, it sought to advertise the unique qualities of the Italian lifestyle internationally. Today, more than seventy years after its inauguration at the Brooklyn Museum in New York, the exhibition has been partly documented and reconstructed by several scholars. Yet few studies to date have explored the microhistories embedded in the exhibition's genesis, its stopovers throughout the United States, its impact in the design world and the afterstories of both the objects and makers showcased.

This conference aims to highlight the heterogeneous nature of the objects displayed, the network of people who made the event possible, and the material culture of the things that came from it.

The Research Team is interested in challenging the notion that the content of the exhibition had “relatively little importance by itself,” a view that Meyric R. Rogers, head curator of decorative arts at the Art Institute of Chicago, used to explain the decision to refrain from compiling an exhaustive catalog. It also seeks to investigate the political, economic, and social networks that underpinned the organization of the exhibition, though, especially, contributions informed by multidisciplinary and transnational perspectives.

This conference looks forward to proposals that address the impact of Italy at Work within the Italian and European circuits of trade fairs and exhibitions of handicrafts, industrial design, fashion, and interior design.

Potential topics include, but are not limited to:

- Case studies related to designers, manufacturers, artisans, intermediaries, and institutions involved with the exhibition;
- Biographies of the objects displayed in the exhibition, their subsequent trajectories, and their journeys through homes, museums and other institutions, and art markets;
- Case studies detailing the specific impact of the Marshall Plan on Italian manufacturers of crafts such as furniture, housewares, fashion and accessories, et al.;
- Non-US-bound exhibitions of a similar nature to Italy at Work that shared parallel aims and impacted local communities.

The Research Team encourages proposals by academics, Ph.D. students, independent scholars and museum and archive professionals. It welcomes contributions from different disciplines and fields of study within the humanities and social sciences, with particular attention to topics debated in an interdisciplinary context. Papers should engage critical thinking and display rigorous background research, preferably grounded in archival sources.

Given the current unpredictability of the pandemic, the conference may be hybrid (dual-mode), traditional in-person format, and online participation when needed.

Applicants are invited to send their proposals for a 20-minute presentation by e-mail in a single Word file as an attachment to voproject-design@polimi.it

Contributions are welcome in English and Italian.

Proposals will include:

- The title of the proposal, together with an abstract (maximum 1,500 characters, spaces included);
- 5 keywords;
- A short CV highlighting activities and publications related to the conference’s theme (maximum 1,000 characters, spaces included).

The deadline for applications is: 8 July 2022.

Notification of decisions will be e-mailed by: 30 July 2022.

Reference:

CFP: Italy at Work: The Italian Lifestyle on Display (Milan, 29 Nov – 1 Dec 22). In: Arthist.net, May 27, 2022 (accessed Sep 16, 2025), <<https://arthist.net/archive/36805>>.