

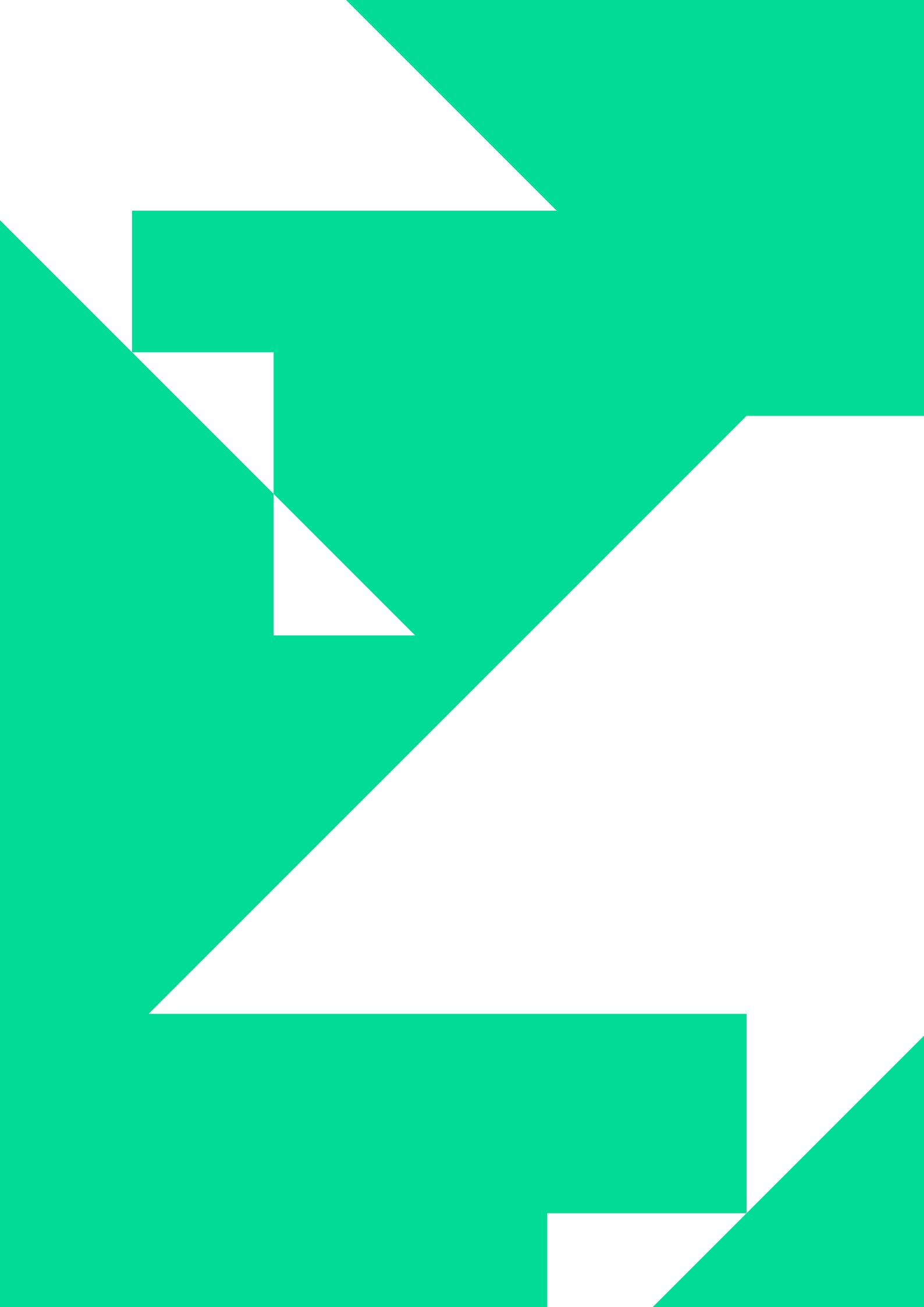


# The italian presence in post war America 1949 – 1972



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## → 1. Abstract

*Transatlantic Transfers: the Italian presence in post-war America* (TT) aims at reassessing the role of Italian culture in the definition of a distinctive cosmopolitan, urban style in America in the years following World War II, and specifically through 1949 and 1972, dates of two exhibitions held at MoMA and reasoning on Italian culture, *XX Century Italian Art and Italy. The new domestic landscape.*



Its overarching scientific objective is to shed new knowledge on both Italian and American cultural histories and on the history of the relations between the two cultures at the onset of the contemporary stage of globalization, particularly by reinstating and re-evaluating the role played by Italian culture within that relation. The preliminary hypothesis directing this analysis is that the extraordinary surge of creative, intellectual, and economic creativity that characterized the Italian cultural scene from the mid-1940s to the early 1970s had a profound impact on the life of an emergent, educated, affluent, urban American middle class to which it offered cultural signifiers, products and aesthetic models of identification and self-representation, thus contributing to the fabrication of post-war American culture much more significantly than has so far been acknowledged.

TT will shift the research agenda from charting the cultural Americanization of Italy to retrieving context-specific instances of the Italianization of style in the United States, and from a national/international to a transnational/global framing of the history of relations between Italy and the U.S.A. TT will also connect cultural, literary, social, film, and art history with the history of architecture and design using a transnational, transatlantic approach and an interdisciplinary methodology linking knowledge production and ideas, politics and international relations, scholarly and material culture, publishing, literature, design, art, and architecture in a way that has never before been so comprehensively applied to the cultural analysis of the relations between Italy and the U.S.A.

Unlike what has been so far studied by the copious existing literature – mostly on Italian immigrant cultures and on specific aspects of the reception of Italian culture in the United States after following World War II, Italian culture in the U.S.A. spliced in two wide zones of reception, and this splitting inaugurated a new stage in the significance of Italian culture for the American definition of taste, social distinction, and identity. Reception of all things Italian clustered around the following two macro categories:

- A popular domain of consumption tightly connected to the patterns of cultural circulation and consumption of the Italian–American network and continuous with the existing infrastructure of popular Italian consumer culture.
  
- A new, in-the-making, style of consumption that met the demand of a high-end mass market that thrived on an



affluent and consumer oriented middle and upper middle class. This mass of consumers enthusiastically received the products of Italian design, fashion, cinema, art, and literature and turned them into signs of class distinction, thus sanctioning a different stage in the role of Italian culture, ideas, and products in America. This, second, trend invites investigation of the hypothesis that a high-end consumer culture tightly connected to a complex transnational infrastructure of producers, manufacturers, artists, designers, architects, writers, publishers, translators critics, connoisseurs, collectors operated as a material as well as a semantic and symbolic mediator between the Italian heritage, the renewal of aesthetics forms following the dissemination of international modernisms, and the demands of new lifestyles.

Therefore, the research project intends to promote an innovative interpretation of the influences and exchange dynamics between Italy and the U.S.A. after World War II, the impact of which has often been underestimated by the international academic community. At the same time, the project aims at an essential reinterpretation of the Italian identity in the transnational panorama, and of its role in the emerging global markets for cultural difference. The transatlantic perspective this project adopts will prove ground-breaking in its capacity to rediscover a neglected and scarcely known chapter of Italian cultural history after World War II, and to make it pivotal to a reassessment (and self-reassessment) of Italian modernity on the international scene. In this regard the project aims at a strong scientific impact among modernist scholars across the disciplines.



## → 2. Description of the project

*Transatlantic Transfers: the Italian presence in post-war America* (TT) aims primarily at filling a gap in the research on the relationships between Italian and American culture in the different disciplinary areas that are its object of study (consumer history, literature and cultural studies, film, architecture and design and fashion).



Therefore, because it is intended to advance innovative and ground-breaking interpretation of mutual influences and exchange dynamics, this project identifies as one of its main objectives the achievement of a strong impact on the international academic community. Secondly, however, it also aims to bring to the knowledge of the larger Italian and international public an understudied and amply unknown segment of twentieth-century Italian cultural history, bringing in a reinterpretation of Italian identities and their role in the global markets of cultural difference.

TT is designed to trace the emergence, manifestations, and meanings of an Italian style [the so called Made in Italy] – distinctly “Italian” and “modern” – that originated in Italy and became internationally known in the 1950s and 1960s, but whose visibility has depended on a complex international and intercultural infrastructure for cultural, political, and economic exchange between Italy and the U.S.A. TT is also designed to investigate how specific Italian works of art and literature, film, design, fashion, visual culture, architecture, food & wine, and popular culture were introduced to American audiences (through events, exhibitions, book reviews, advertisements, festivals) and how a recognizable modern style associated to Italian iconographic public figures (writers, artists, designers, intellectuals and movie stars) was appropriated as a marker of distinction in the identity formation of an upward mobile, cosmopolitan, affluent American middle class.

### **STATE OF THE ART**

Transatlantic studies of the cultural and economic relations between Italy and the U.S.A. in the Twentieth Century have been dominated by the transfer of Fordism, mass consumerism, and popular culture from the U.S.A. to Italy, in particular as part of the larger process of the Americanization of Europe after World War II and U.S. soft-power strategies aimed at contrasting the ideological and cultural seductions of Communism during the Cold War years.

Relations between Italy and Italian literary and artistic cultures have likewise tended to either emphasize the imaginary, symbolic, or exemplary status of Italy and Italian culture as a splendid ruin in/for American letters. Even within disciplinary domains such as film studies, research on the interactions between American and Italian cinema in the years under consideration has primarily focused on the American impact on Italian film and mass culture, even when it addressed specific film





genres, such as peplum, movements such as Neorealism and its legacy, and audiences, namely Italian American spectators.

On the contrary, a comprehensive study of the impact of Italian products and lifestyles on the American consumer landscape has yet to be undertaken. Much needed is also a study of the influence of Italian cinema and culture on American cinema, and so is a reconsideration of the role of Italian Modernism of the 1930s, the culture of the post-war reconstruction of the 1950s, and of the so-called “economic boom” of the 1960s.

At the beginning of 20th century Italian architecture was loved, visited, studied and reproduced in American villas and palaces: this is especially true for medieval palaces, in particular for Palazzo Davanzati in Florence, restored as a museum in 1910, and promoted on magazines, becoming a model, well known and reproduced especially in interiors across the U.S.A. In the field of interiors, relationships were activated and reinforced by large exhibitions, starting from Italy at work (1950), in which five interiors were set up to diffuse the Italian culture of dwelling. The exhibition foreshadowed exchanges in the design and production of furniture, encouraged by Italian Institutions and magazines. They composed a narrow net of mutual knowledge, leading up to the 1972 MoMA exhibition Italy. The new domestic landscape, translating in design and architecture a set of requests deriving from the American experiences of figurative arts.

Similarly, recent scholarship in transatlantic studies, consumer culture, film studies, and cultural studies has demonstrated that mass migration first, political concerns later, and finally economic and consumer patterns generated transatlantic networks and relations that contradict the one-directional orientation of the post-war Americanization thesis.

In areas of consumer culture like architecture, design, food, and fashion, Italian products and ideas introduced American urban consumers not only to new lifestyles but also to new consumer ethics and politics. The formation and articulation of these discourses, and the cooperation between private business, state- and non-state actors, and the Italian American community in defining and promoting Italian products, lifestyles, and imaginaries in the U.S.A., however, still need to be seriously analysed. Many films of the post-war years produced or co-produced in Italy by Italian and American producers show the extent of the transcontinental shape of post-war Italian cinema, and point to the need for a more subtle models of analysis that help understand the actual configuration of economic, cultural, and political relations between Italy and the U.S.A. in the post-war years.



Similarly, the availability of first-hand accounts of the literary presence of American writers in Italy in the post-war years, the emergence of international literary and artistic milieu in main Italian cities, the intensification of translations and distribution of Italian novels and other books, and the professional relations generated from the institutionalization of programs for intellectual and academic exchanges, such as the International Literary Prizes and the Fulbright Exchange Programs, suggest that much overdue is a more accurate understanding of how literary and cultural networks operating between Italy and the U.S.A. were forged and then expanded beyond the boundaries of official programs created in the effort of supporting the consolidation of economic and political relations in anti-communist function is much overdue.

To understand the influence of Italian consumer culture on American urban cultures and lifestyles after World War II is to recognize two vital pre-war backstories.

The first historical antecedent is the late-nineteenth-century synchronic emergence of modern consumer society in Europe and the U.S.A. and the apogee of European imperialism (including the more modest Italian strain centred in the Mediterranean and in the Horn of Africa) and a new American imperialism originating in the Spanish-American War of 1898, which inaugurated the "American Century." In this convergence, both American and Italian consumer cultures developed mutually intelligible notions of the modern/imperial self and the colonized other. Classic Roman imperialism, its aesthetics and imaginaries, significantly influenced American domestic imperial consumerism; that is, the perception of the American consumer to be the beneficiary of a "global emporium" of commodities and cultural differences. Italy entered this imaginary as the repository of artistic beauty rooted in a classical past and pastoral delight.

The second backstory is turn-of-the-twentieth-century mass migration of 4.5 million people from Italy (for the most part Southern Italian rural migrants) to U.S.A. largest cities, which complicated the imperial image of Italy rooted in the North, the cities, and the highbrow culture of opera, Renaissance art, and romantic nationalist landscapes. It was Fascism, with its emphasis on both imperial modernism and the traditionalism of rural folklore, to first reconcile the "white Italy" rooted in Roman civilization with the "black Italy" of familism, primitivism, sensuality, and spirituality placed in the Mediterranean and exported to America via the immigrants. In the 1950s and 1960s these different Italian geographies, heritages, and "souls" were further rearticulated in a modern Italian consumer culture that strongly influenced the supposed centre of pro-



duction and global exportation of a hegemonic mass culture (America). These integrated Italian identities still define and promote commercial Italian culture on global markets.

Even if an early modernist Italian art had been introduced in the U.S.A. prior to the establishment of the Fascist regime, access to a more comprehensive body of cultural works that would exemplify Italian modernism – particularly in literature – became available only after World War II, with the consequence that the concept of Italian Modernism as it was understood in the U.S.A. and thence relaunched for a global cultural and commercial environment was extremely syncretic: both more spurious (for instance, it included artists as diverse as the early Futurists, Lucio Fontana, Concrete Art and Industrial Design, as well as writers as different as Italo Svevo and Alberto Moravia, to give one example) and extended in time across a longer span of years compared to other modernist waves across Europe or the United States.

### METHODOLOGY

The circulation of cultural and literary artefacts and the cultures they evoked was incorporated in a high-end segment of American consumer culture that was tightly connected to a complex transnational infrastructure of producers and to a massive presence of Italians in America. This consumer culture operated as a semantic and symbolic mediator between the (older) Italian heritage, the American renewal of aesthetics forms following the dissemination of international modernisms, and the demands of new lifestyles and new social identities.

Hence, we intend to test the larger hypothesis that Italian culture has influenced North American culture beyond the typical domains of migrant culture, affecting American popular and cultivated cultures in a new transcultural way at a specific stage of globalization still dependent upon production, but also generating effects on immaterial culture and on the self-description of American society through narrative and cultural forms whose effects lasted far beyond the decades under this project's observation.

Transnational, interdisciplinary and interculturalist research methods are necessary to detect and study the signifiers of a modern Italian and cosmopolitan style and their circulation. These involve qualitative approaches in cultural and historical inquiries of visual, oral, and written sources and discourse analysis, as well as the analysis of the links between the circulation of printed material, translations, editorial and production



projects, reviews, and the individuals and social groups that made them and their circulation possible, as well as the study of their financial and material conditions of circulation.

The themes of research will be investigated with a variety of conceptual and methodological tools, based on the interaction of a wide range of sources: written, oral, visual, recorded, and displayed material, design and architectural projects and the history of their making, editorial contracts and correspondence, manuscripts.

Given the TT strongly multidisciplinary and interdisciplinary character, coherently involving scholars in different fields of the social sciences and humanities, the research project will coalesce the theoretical and methodological apparatus of the different fields and their scientific literatures in a single analytical framework.

The research will then explore the subject matter of the transatlantic circulation of Italian cultures in the direction of the U.S.A. from three different angles and operative hypothesis:

- the study of Modernism and of the impact of modern Italian culture on American literary and visual culture, and the reception of Italy as a modern society in post-war urban America;
- transnationalism and the transatlantic circulation of people, capital, goods, ideas, lifestyles, imaginaries and emotional regimes between Italy and the U.S.A.; and
- the Italianization of American urban culture and its continuing development beyond the 1960s.



## → 3. Work-phases

TT activities will be organized in three following and interconnected phases, crossing the reasearch activities of all involved partners.



### **MAPPING (MONTH 0 - 15)**

Given the multidisciplinary and interdisciplinary character of the research, methodological cross-fertilization, information exchange and technical and organizational cooperation among all Research Units is crucial from the first stage of research. It will therefore be dedicated to identifying the archival material most relevant to research, selecting illuminating case studies, and finessing the research methodology.

The shaping of a multi-disciplinary and inter-disciplinary frame on analysis and effective mode of collaborative operation among the Research Units is to be considered itself an important by product of the project. Research on primary sources will be pursued partly in Italy, and partly in the U.S.A.

### **KNITTING (MONTH 10-26)**

In the second stage of research, materials gathered will be continuously deepened and a net of connections within them will be set. With this aim research results will be circulated and discussed among the participants to the research in rotating seminars and symposia organized by the four Research Units.

Leading international scholars will be invited to participate in the seminars and conferences at every stage of the project, from the fixation of the bibliographic, archival, theoretical, and methodological apparatus of the research to the discussion of the final results before publication. Leading international scholars in the fields of contemporary social and cultural history, cultural, film, architecture and design studies will also act as advisors in the preparation of the final exhibit and documentary film and third-party evaluators of the overall results of the research.

### **SHARING (MONTH 24-36)**

The final stage of the research will be dedicated to the synthesis of collected materials, the publication of the two research volumes, the preparation of the final exhibit, the making of the documentary film and the presentation of the results in the course of an international interdisciplinary conference. The aim will be to define in the plainest way contents of the final books and of the exhibition, to guarantee the wider appeal to the contents of the TT.



## → 4. Dissemination

At regular frequency the outcome of the TT will be set and disseminated using the following instruments.



## WEBSITE

The website will function as a flexible and easy to browse structure, in daily evolution, gathering and organizing materials explored during the TT; it will be the instrument for the dissemination of the research and at the same time its repository. It will be addressed also to a generic public, including not specialized users.

## ATLAS OF ITALIAN MODERN TRANSATLANTIC TRANSFER

The Atlas will show case studies and significant episodes, and will map relationship between topics; it will allow customization based on topics. It will be implemented by a Video Series, published on a Vimeo channel, highlighting in few minute evocative objects, places, experiences, summarizing the contents of TT; every research unit will realize 3/5 videos a year.

## CONFERENCES

The duration of TT will be articulated by a set of conferences, with the main aim to share knowledge within the research group and to grant the comparability of results through different areas. If the Kick off conference will define the field of activities, the final one will point out on the presentation and evaluation of the results; Mid-term conferences will work on the intermediate progresses, focusing on specific topics on a shared frame.

Conferences will be held every 8 months, one per University taking part to the TT. They will be mainly addressed to a public of scholars, interested in deepening knowledge in the field of transatlantic relations. Partners will also organize, in conjunction with conferences, internal seminars involving all participants and dedicated to discuss methods and assumptions.

## BOOK SERIES

A book series will accompany the development of the research, ensuring knowledge sharing and alignment of results between partners. The final one, made of two volumes, will accompany the final exhibition and setting TT results and hosting essays of selected international scholar.

Every research unit will publish two books or special issues of international journal every, in a dedicated collection of an





editor of international level. They will be mainly addressed to a public of scholars.

## **FINAL EXHIBITION**

The exhibition will be set at Triennale di Milano.

It will be a narrative path divided into different thematic environments, transversal to the different research areas, able to reconstruct the influence of Italian culture through design, literature, consumer culture, cinema and all those events that have contributed to the formation of “Made in Italy” in the American collective imagination.

The structure of the exhibition will consist of a succession of thematic stations that will highlight different cultural areas starting from two categories: the places of everyday American life in which it was conveyed the impact of Italian culture and the events and milestones that have led to its diffusion and affirmation.



## → 5. Project development

Although each Research Unit will conduct research on discrete topics and case studies, one of the goals of this highly interdisciplinary research project is to integrate cohesively the different disciplinary approaches in a coherent common analytical framework. This goal will be achieved through continuous cooperation to be realized through frequent seminars and conferences and the participation of leading international scholars supporting the research team in its methodological elaborations.



The many young researchers who will specifically be hired for the project will on the one hand work at bridging the disciplinary boundaries between the historians, architects, literary, film and visual art studies scholars that make up the research team, and on the other be trained at doing research in a trans-disciplinary perspective and international scope.

Consistent with the above-mentioned goals, the project is developed in 5 research fields.

### **A. TRANSATLANTIC CONSUMER CULTURES**

#### **Modern Italian commercial culture and exports in the United States**

This research field will study the reception of cultural exports in urban America. Recent contributions have stressed that the “Transatlantic Century,” far from being a one-sided story of triumphant Americanization, witnessed a multidirectional movement of ideas, goods, and individuals. The impact of Italian style on urban America is a significant aspect of these transatlantic flows. It will focus on the way in which Italian architecture, art, cinema, design and fashion, and food permeated U.S.A. urban landscape, highlighting the connections between the spheres of production and the market, and providing an overview of the role played by Italian marketers of “Made in Italy” goods and lifestyles (Italian state and non-state actors and the Italian-American community) and the role of receiving U.S.A. consumer institutions. It will use a varied array of qualitative and quantitative sources, including archival documents of the Italian Chambers of Commerce and the Italian Institute for International Commerce, focusing on the agenda, readership, and corporate dimension of newspapers and magazines (from lowbrow tabloids to highbrow magazines) as mediators and popularizers.

### **B. MODERN ITALIAN COOL**

#### **Cultural networking and the circulation of Italian literary, artistic, and cultural icons between Italy and United States**

This research field will investigate the formal and informal venues, institutions, and channels that favoured the circulation of modern(ist) Italian art, literature, and music culture in the U.S.A., in order to both shed historical light on an understudied segment of twentieth-century transatlantic cultural history, and to philologically reconstruct cases of direct and indirect influence of Italian culture on American letters and cultural taste. Our hypothesis is that Italian literary and artistic networks have been more influential on American culture



than has so far been acknowledged, and that precisely the late modernist recirculation in translation of Italian literature through American culture was crucial to the canonization of an internationally recognizable to modern(ist) Italian canon. It will investigate transatlantic exchanges and networks in Post-war visual arts, with a particular focus on reception of Post-minimalism and Arte Povera on both sides of the Atlantic.

### **C. GREAT BEAUTIES**

#### **The impact of Italian modernization on post-war American film and cinematic culture**

This research field will reconstruct the forms through which Italian cinema has contributed to the creation of a new imagery and cosmopolitan urban style in American cinema, with particular emphasis on the relationships between film, lifestyles, emotional regimes and structures of feeling. The period under review is characterized by the decline of the Studio System, the rise of new forms of art cinema, and the spread of innovative modes of production. It will investigate the influence and dissemination of images and signs of Italy and Italian style in four production areas: Hollywood mainstream cinema; TV productions; Independent cinema; Experimental/underground cinema and video art. The research will focus the functions and legacies of Italian visual culture in the American audiovisual production, taking into account films and cinematic trends whose circulation in the U.S. is documentable.

### **D. MAPPING THE TRANSFER**

#### **The Italian presence in American design, architecture and urbanism**

Aimed at reassessing a narrative mainly based on the American involvement in Italian architecture, housing programs and planning since WWII, this research field will re-examine the nature of this multifaceted transatlantic exchange, tracing a first overview of the presence of Italian design and fashion, architecture and urbanism in both specialist and popular culture in the United States. It will focus on the transfer of Italian architectural culture and technical knowledge in design and planning to explore their impact at the local level; map the main venues and circumstances of exchange (travels, exhibits, conferences, publications); and identify the main actors of the process and their specific agendas.

It will analyse other forms of representation of Italian culture in the transformation of U.S.A. urban landscape, such as the impact of Italian food culture in urban development; the image



of Italian cities in American media cultures; the influence of Italian design and luxury products in the evolution of a shared imagery that has shaped American aesthetics and taste. The WP will proceed from systematic recognition of the circulation/presence of Italian architecture on the specialized press, popular magazines and U.S. cultural industry in the decades under scrutiny, to gain a deeper understanding of its dissemination and reception.

In particular, in regard to fashion, the research field will focus not only on the relation between Italian fashion and the movie industry and American movie stars but also on the reasons and impacts of the success of Italian fashion within the American retailing system that, thanks to the positive acceptance from department stores and buyers, helped the diffusion of Italian fashion and the creation and consolidation of an “Italian styles” for the use of American high-end classes.



## → 6. Potentialities and impacts of the project

TT will uncover mechanisms on how and to what ends Italian cultural signs have been circulated, appropriated and endorsed, charting their sedimentation through elaboration in American culture. This articulated process, carried out in a wide sharing dimension between different research sectors, offers numerous possibilities for increasing scientific, economic and social value. The dissemination of research products can revitalize exchanges at all levels between Italy and the U.S.A., opening new fields of interaction between the two nations.



## **SCIENTIFIC IMPACT**

TT will enforce a transnational approach and an interdisciplinary methodology linking knowledge production of different research fields of the social sciences and humanities in a way that has never before been so comprehensively applied to the cultural analysis of the relations between Italy and the U.S.A. TT will not only comprehensively analyse and collect a wide range of sources such as written, oral, visual, recorded, and displayed materials, design and architectural projects, but generate new sources and products.

## **ACADEMIC POTENTIAL**

TT stands out for its transnational approach and for the interdisciplinary of skills, always favouring the exchange between scholars from an open perspective. TT will promote the partnership of the various research institutes involved through the exchange experiences at the respective sites and the sharing of best practices.

## **ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT**

In the post-war years, the U.S.A. has been a magnet that attracted Italian industrial, commercial, and intellectual production redefining its own urban culture and disseminating it on a global scale and global markets. The economic impact of the TT research on contemporary Italian national economy and Italy's industrial exports is evident in the redefinition and valorisation of the "Made in Italy" brand which produces immense intangible value on the global market for its recognition and its differentiation. A potential value acquisition is expected in all the production sectors that benefit directly or indirectly from the dissemination of research-related events. Finally, it is possible to share the results of scientific research with an extended audience through different kinds of post-productions capable of generating new forms of economics at national and international level in different fields (tourism, publishing, cinema, etc.).

## **SOCIAL VALUE E PUBLIC DISSEMINATION**

The results of the research will be characterized by widespread dissemination even in the non-academic field in order to promote a greater awareness of the close link between Italy



and the U.S.A at all levels. Overcoming cultural barriers of stereotypes and clichés is one of the main objectives of research and guarantees an immense social added value. To disseminate its results in Italian non-academic, political, social and business world, TT will invite foundations, museums, and public institutions sensitive to the research to become associate partner of the project. We plan to involve those different institutions from both countries inviting them to research symposia, conferences, and colloquia in order to secure knowledge exchange and transfer between academic and non-academic dimensions. Many significant initiatives will also be addressed to a large non-specialized public such as the film shorts, the documentary and the final exhibition at the Milan Triennale in order to guarantee the maximum dissemination of the contents at all levels.



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